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# Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days - Volume 01

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# Character Introductions and Prologue

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**Translations:** Goldpanner

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## Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days Vol. 1: The 14th

xxx

Because even if you can't remember, it doesn't mean that the memories have disappeared.

xxx

I remember.

I remember that, I haven't forgotten.

I won't forget.

xxx

Characters

Xion

A girl who appeared as the 14<sup>th</sup> member, six days after Roxas joined the Organisation. In the beginning, she kept her hood up, and never showed her true face. By and by, she becomes important to Roxas.

Roxas

The protagonist of this story. Number XIII of the Organisation. He has no memories of the time before he became an Organisation member, and so as he performs missions every day, he has doubts and questions about everything around him. He is able to wield the keyblade.

## Axel

A wielder of fire-imbued chakrams. Number VIII of the Organisation. While fulfilling the role of mentor to Roxas, the main character, he melts little by little. He acts for a common goal shared with certain members of the Organisation.

## Riku=Replica

A 'doll' of Riku, created by number IV of the Organisation, Vexen, for the sake of certain research. After meeting this experimental body in Castle Oblivion, great doubts begin to grow inside Axel.

## Saïx

Number VII, who serves as the Organisation's aide-de-camp. Because Roxas and the other members of the Organisation are always receiving missions via Saïx, there are many meetings in which they make contact with him, however, his detached objections give a cold and stern impression.

## Xemnas

The leader of the Organisation, and Xehanort's nobody. He is a figure of absolute power within the Organisation. It seems he knows something about Roxas' past...

## Xigbar

Number II of the Organisation, who wields gun arrows. With a carefree sort of personality, he calls Roxas 'kiddo' and Xion 'poppet', teasing them every day. However, he is very well informed about various things, and it is hard to guess what he's really like inside.

## Beast

A prince who was turned into a beast by a witch's curse. Roxas and the others spot him while investigating Beast's Castle.

## Pete

A detestable fellow who does nothing but evil. This time, too, Roxas and the others see him toddling about behind the scenes, with the goal of increasing the number of heartless.

# Genie

The genie of Agrabah's lamp. He left to travel with a flying carpet, but he became worried about his best friend, Aladdin, and while he returns to check on him, he meets Roxas and the others.

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Continue to [Chapter 1: Beginning of the End](#)

# Chapter 1: Beginning of the End

**Written by:** Kanemaki Tomoco

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*That place is always lit up by the same scarlet sunset.*

*I wonder where that place was. It must have been Twilight Town.*

*“Roxas...”*

*I wonder who it was that spoke to me.*

*I don’t remember the name of the person that stood in front of me, wearing a black coat.*

*But I must have been given a name there.*

*And then I met him.*

*Him—that guy with the red hair, and of course wearing a black coat.*

*And then, we ate ice cream.*

*I remember.*

*I remember that, I haven’t forgotten.*

*I won’t forget.*

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The preparations for his awakening are complete.

As a Heartless, he has already vanished, the Nobody remaining—and, it is he, returned to normal.

xxx

The sound of waves could be heard.

The tide was moving in and out, washing sand away from the beach.

The boy's body sank slowly into the water.

Or, perhaps he was trying to be caught by the waves.

And then, the boy opened his eyes.

A stark white room. A stark white bed. Through the wide window, a pitch black sky and the neon of skyscrapers were visible.

*Where is this place, again?*

*This is my room.*

*This is a place called 'The World That Never Was'.*

*And, my name is Roxas.*

*That's my name.*

*I'm number 13 of the Organisation.*

*I feel like I've been dreaming the whole time.*

*No, I also feel like I was awake the whole time.*

*Yesterday—yesterday, I was by a dark ocean. I met him there.*

*Our boss.*

*After that—I don't really remember so well.*

*Maybe the stuff that happened yesterday didn't really happen at all.*

*Maybe I'm still dreaming.*

The boy—Roxas got out of bed, and left the room.

He continued along a corridor, white just like his room, and made of something inorganic. It was a little like stone, and a little like something artificial; Roxas didn't know what it was. Only that there was a space that continued along there. Many doors, like the one to his own room, lined the corridor. The design of the rooms on the other side of the doors were also probably the same. And so, inside were probably people just like him.

Shortly, the space opened out, and he started descending a sloping hallway. At the end of it was The Garden of Weaving Light and Dark—the lobby, it was called. He had been told to come here upon waking.

By who?  
He didn't really remember.

The lobby was chilly, enclosed in transparent glass, outside of which there was nothing but pitch black darkness and white buildings.

'Huh? You finally up?'

Roxas turned. A blonde woman, wearing the same black coat as Roxas, was looking down at him. Roxas couldn't answer at all, and she—Larxene curled her lip, resting her hip on the side of the sofa. Roxas had no idea what on earth the change in her expression meant. But, when he saw that look, he got just a little uneasy.

There were three people other than Larxene wearing that same black coat, spending the extra time they didn't know what to do with inside the lobby.

Roxas approached someone who was looking at the pitch dark outside the window; a person with red hair.

Perhaps there was a reason he was chosen to pair up with Roxas, perhaps there wasn't. Roxas didn't know that, either.

But, when Roxas drew nearer to that person, he turned around, a smile showing on his face.

"Hey, Roxas."

"....."

Roxas cast his gaze downwards. He didn't really know what he should say in reply.

"What's up? You need something?"

*I don't really need anything, but I was thinking maybe it would be nice to talk to someone, that's all.*

The red-haired person—Axel looked at Roxas, who was still looking down.

*That reminds me—that's right, that day, it must have been the first day, the one who was with me was—*

“Oh yeah, they said we have to meet at the Round Room today... what a pain in the ass...”

“Round Room...” Roxas murmured.

*I remember the place they call the Round Room.*

*That was also on the first day—no, wasn't it after that?*

Roxas looked up at Axel.

“Apparently there's something we have to hear. Let's hurry up and go.”

Axel held up one hand, and darkness opened up before it.

*Oh, I know. We people of the Organisation can manipulate that darkness at will.*

*That darkness must be a—*

“You wanna hurry and use a dark corridor?”

“Dark corridor...”

*That's right, a dark corridor.*

*On the other side of the darkness, other worlds open up. Instead of using doors, so to speak.*

“I hate it, always get a sore ass from sitting on those hard seats,” said Axel, laughing as he spoke.

He was interrupted by a person standing in the centre of the lobby.

“You two, hurry up.”

Axel and Roxas were the only ones left in the lobby, apart from a man with long blue hair and a large scar on his forehead—Saïx. Larxene had already left. The others had probably left to be present at the Round Room long since.

“Yeah yeah—let's go, Roxas. Open a dark corridor for yourself, too,” said Axel, entering the darkness he had opened.

“.....”



The darkness closed up before Roxas' eyes.

"Hurry up," announced Saïx, and he also disappeared into a dark opening.

Roxas was the only one left in the lobby.

Roxas stared at his own hand.

*How do I open the dark like that?*

Roxas lifted a hand, like Axel had, and closed his eyes for a second.

He recalled that darkness.

*I have to get to that place—the Round Room.*

Beside Roxas, the darkness opened its gaping mouth.

*Is the Round Room really at the end of that?*

Roxas stepped inside.

xxx

The hall that they called the Round Room was enclosed by a circular wall. The walls were made of the same white material as the other rooms. In the middle of the room was a large circular table—a stage-like 'round table', and thirteen seats surrounded it. The chairs were tall, and each had a different height.

And, twelve other black-coated people had also taken their seats.

Roxas couldn't remember all their names very clearly, and he stared vaguely at the 'round table' placed in the middle of the room. Painted there was a mark that was very similar to a cross; it was also painted on Roxas' bed. Roxas knew what it meant.

*That's the seal of the Organisation—of the Nobodies.*

*But, I don't know who told me that.*

"Today is a day that deserves commemoration."

The air quivered with the resounding voice.

*Oh, I know. That voice belongs to—that guy, our boss, Xemnas.*

And then, a lone person appeared in the Round Room.

“A new comrade has joined our ranks.”

*I can't tell what that person's face looks like, what with it hidden so deep in their hood.*

“The 14<sup>th</sup>...”

Things were suddenly flitting across Roxas' mind. It was only a few days ago—probably six days ago.

Axel dressed him in a black coat, and then brought him to this room.

The one chosen by the Keyblade—

*Xemnas must have said that to me, that day.*

*The Keyblade?*

*I don't even know what that is.*

Roxas looked at the person standing in the middle of the Round Room.

The person lifted their face for just a moment, and Roxas stirred, getting the feeling that they were looking at him.

It looked like that person's mouth, which should have been concealed and unseeable under the hood, was smiling.

*I feel like I've seen that smile somewhere before.*

*But I can't remember where.*

*Until now, these seven days past, I haven't once been scared of the things I can't remember.*

*But now, I'm somehow—scared.*

*Scared?*

*What does it mean, to be scared?*

Roxas sensed something flicker, and he looked up.

Xemnas had disappeared, wrapped in darkness. And then, one after the other, the members of the Organisation disappeared.

The 14<sup>th</sup> was still looking at him.

And then, Roxas passed out.

xxx

What'll happen to me—?

I'm—fad—ing—into the dark...

xxx

Xemnas watched Roxas, who had been put down to sleep on his bed.

“—Hurry up and awaken.”

There was no answer.

Xemnas' figure vanished from Roxas' room.

xxx

The air in the Round Room quivered.

As if the darkness was burning, many dark corridors opened into the seats, and the figures of the black-coated members appeared.

There were seven of them. The seven people between No. I and No. VII—in other words, Xemnas, Xigbar, Xaldin, Vexen, Lexeaus, Zexion, and Saïx.

“To allow the newcomer to attend.”

The biggest newcomer amongst the members in attendance—Saïx stared straight at the centre of the Round Room, without showing any particular reaction to Vexen's words.

“Have we been able to extract the ‘key’?” Xigbar asked.

“Key? You must be talking about the fragments. If it's only the fragments, we can take them out without the aid of the witch's power,” Vexen answered.

“Are more fragments necessary?” asked Zexion.

“That depends on the movement of the hero,” Vexen said, without hesitation.

Lexeaus opened his mouth. “More importantly, are the movements of the heroes being properly monitored?”

“Marluxia has been ordered to act without any slipups,” answered Saïx, this

time.

“The hero’s Nobody appearing was pretty irregular in itself, anyway,” said Xaldin, and all gazes concentrated on him. “Doesn’t the existence of the hero’s Nobody make continuing the plan meaningless?”

“Well, we need some kinda insurance, is what I’m sayin,” said Xigbar.

“The plan has been set in motion,” Xemnas interrupted, and all six faces lifted. “In order to assure our new power, we will put our first plan into action,” he stated, in conclusion at last, and the other six each nodded.

xxx

He opened his eyes, and found himself on top of his bed.

*What happened yesterday?*

*I can’t really remember, like always.*

Roxas got out of bed, and went to look out the window.

*The sky is as pitch dark as always, so I don’t really know, but it seems like the date has changed.*

*I have to go to the lobby once I’ve woken up. At the moment, that’s all I understand.*

Roxas left his room and walked the hallways just like he had the day before, heading for the lobby.

“Roxas,” came the call, the instant he stepped into his place of destination. It was Saïx. Roxas stared vaguely up at him.

*Mission.*

*Somehow I get that it’s not okay for me to just be here.*

*I don’t really understand what I’m here for, though, like always.*

“It’s closer to training than a mission. There are various things we’d like you to remember before going out on missions. Today you will be moving with Axel. Isn’t that nice, Axel.”

Roxas shifted his gaze to the side of Saïx, and Axel was standing there. And,

behind him, Roxas saw one more member was standing there.

That was the 14<sup>th</sup>.

“What is this... am I supposed to be his mentor or something?” Axel answered, scratching his head.

“Yes. Teach Roxas mission basics.”

“Yeah yeah. Understood.”

Removed from Axel and Saïx’s conversation, Roxas watched the 14<sup>th</sup>.

Like always, their face was hidden deep in a hood, and he couldn’t tell anything.

“We’re going, Roxas,” said Axel, peering into Roxas’ face. Following his gaze, he turned to the 14<sup>th</sup>.

“What’s up? You interested in that one? That must be... come to think of it, I dunno either,” said Axel, scratching his head again.

Saïx opened his mouth. “It’s Number 14, Xion.”

“Xion, then...” Axel muttered.

“Xion...” Roxas voiced, quietly.

“Got it memorised? Roxas.”

He shrugged, and Axel looked deep into his face again. “Yeah...” Roxas replied, voice lacking strength. Xion was still at the end of his gaze. But, it was also possible that Roxas wasn’t looking at Xion.

*Roxas’ blue eyes reflect the view of his surroundings, but for some reason, it feels like he isn’t looking at anything.*

*Is this vagueness just what you expect of a newly-woken Nobody?*

*I want to try and hear him answer me, thought Axel.*

“So, what’s my name?”

“Axel...”

It seemed that Roxas hadn’t been able to forget it, somehow.

*I wanna ask one more thing.*

“What’s our boss’ name?”

“Xemnas...”

“Not like you’re gonna forget that, anyway. Okay, let’s go, will we?” asked Axel, a smile playing on his lips, as he opened a dark corridor beside him.

xxx

At the end of the dark corridor was Twilight Town’s underground passageway.

“So... well, first I’ll explain the mission, and we’ll go from there, will we...”

Axel turned to face Roxas, who was following behind him.

“Okay? Today’s mission is—ahh...”

Axel went to explain, scratched his head, and sighed.

Roxas’ eyes were as indifferent as always, like he wasn’t seeing a thing.

“Rather than explaining stuff, it’d be faster to just do it. Okay, first, come with me.”

Axel started running. He hadn’t seen Roxas ever move fast before, but to his surprise, Roxas followed him pretty quickly.

Climbing up a level, Axel stopped halfway, and turned to Roxas.

“During a mission, you shouldn’t run straight for the target. You gotta pay attention to your surroundings.”

“—Pay... attention?”

*Those words that came from Roxas just now are the most ‘with it’ I’ve seen him so far.*

*Maybe it’s cause he’s moving his body.*

*Even though it’s not perfect, Roxas, who hasn’t been saying anything but the names of things and people until now, is joining words together.*

“It means you gotta look hard at the things around you. You’ll overlook surprising things, otherwise. Got it memorised?”

“Yeah—got it.” Roxas nodded obediently.

“Okay, let’s go practise, will we,” said Axel, brightly, able to think that those eyes were finally taking him in. “There’s a treasure chest somewhere in this area. Today’s mission is to find that.”

“So we should look for the... treasure chest, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Look carefully, now,” said Axel, and Roxas looked around him.

*From the beginning, Roxas was like a pure white canvas that had to be painted on. Some of his reactions are slow, but it feels like there’s some bigger reason why.*

*From the first day we met, he’s been different from the others somehow.*

xxx

Axel watched a vanishing dark corridor, scratching his head. On the other side of that corridor, he had faintly been able to see the Organisation’s boss—Xemnas.

“He told me all of a sudden to take him back, but...”

Axel gazed at the boy standing in front of him, remaining in the trails of vanishing darkness.

The boy in the white shirt was at least ten years younger than himself, Axel guessed. Though age wasn’t something that existed, for nobodies.

*I don’t even know the boy’s name.*

*He must be a Nobody that was just born today, in this town.*

*I know that this town, the one they call Twilight Town, is a special place.*

*It’s a town of twilight, standing in the rift between darkness and light.*

*The darkness of dusk blurs the figure, in the same way light does.*

*Here, those that belong to neither darkness nor light—even nobodies are allowed to exist.*

And so, Axel hung about in this town when he had free time.

Walking around idly like always, Xemnas had suddenly appeared in front of him.

He hadn't been wagging missions or anything, but there's nothing like bumping into one's boss all of a sudden for awkward.

But, Xemnas had merely given Axel one order, without reproaching him.

"It's a new member. Take him back to the castle, prepare him suitably, and bring him to me."

"Huh?" Axel had asked, and a dark corridor opened up behind Xemnas. And then, he disappeared as if being swallowed.

*Well then take him back yourself, I thought, but I'm not in the position to be able to say things like that.*

And, the boy didn't move at all.

A tiny sigh escaped Axel. "Follow me."

He opened a dark corridor, but the boy didn't react.

"....Oi."

"....."

Axel closed the portal, nothing for it, and stepped closer.

The boy finally moved, looking up at Axel.

"What's your name?"

The boy blinked.

*Dunno if that blink was actually a reaction.*

"I'll ask you again. What's your name?"

"...Ro, xas..." he said, in a husky voice.

*I know that Xemnas gave him that name just before.*

*I got my name in the same way.*

"I see, Roxas. My name is Axel. Got it memorised?"

The boy—Roxas did nothing but gaze straight up at Axel.



“Anyway, let’s go home.”

*Well, I doubt whether that gloomy castle is any place for Roxas, who has just begun his existence, to go home to, but even so, there’s nothing else to do.*

Just then, Roxas’ gaze shifted.

*That’s the first time he’s showed a direct reaction-y kind of reaction.*

“Hm? What’s up?”

At the end of Roxas’ gaze were some of the town’s children.

*I’ve seen them countless times.*

*A noisy group of three kids from around the town. They look like they’d be about Roxas’ age.*

And, in their hands was sea-salt ice cream.

A special flavour—a sweetly salty blue ice treat.

Axel didn’t exactly hate it—actually, he liked it. Well, he remembered liking that ice cream.

“...We’ll go home after we eat some ice cream, will we?”

Axel started walking towards the shop in the middle of the town plaza.

“Follow me, Roxas! I’ll even show you around my special place!”

Roxas didn’t move.

“Geez, guess I got no choice.”

Axel went back, and clapped his hand on Roxas’ shoulder.

Roxas trembled, surprised, and looked up at Axel.

“Let’s go,” said Axel, and when he started walking, Roxas came along. Slightly relieved, he headed for the milkbar in the middle of the plaza.

xxx

“Is this... a treasure chest?” Roxas’ worry made Axel turn around.

There was a treasure chest at Roxas’ feet.

“Good on you, you found it.”

Roxas stared at the treasure chest, unmoving.

“...What’s up?”

“Today’s mission was to find the treasure chest...”

*Like I thought, Roxas seems a little... off, somehow.*

“You know, Roxas. Even if you’ve found it, it doesn’t really mean much if you don’t take what’s in it, right?”

“Is it okay to take it?”

“Yeah, you can do what you like with whatever you find inside boxes during missions.”

And, a shining key appeared in Roxas’ hand.

*Each member of the Organisation has their own weapon, but, could that be—a keyblade?*

Roxas touched the treasure chest with the key, and it opened with a burst of light.

*It’s a keyblade, no mistake.*

*That’s right, on that day, when I took Roxas back to the castle, to stand under Xemnas, he said so.*

The one chosen by the Keyblade—

*If so, is Roxas the Nobody of the keyblade hero?*

*But of course—I haven’t heard anything about the hero becoming a Heartless.*

From inside the treasure chest, Roxas collected a—potion, and the key disappeared from his hand.

“Okay, good work. How was it? Do you kind of get how a mission works?” said Axel, making an effort to be composed.

“—Yeah.”

“You really okay?”

Roxas lifted his face. “This kind of thing is—”

“Hm?”

“It’s nothing,” said Roxas, with a shy smile.

*That reaction was completely different from anything else until now.*

Axel also let a smile spread across his face, with a strange sensation he’d never felt before.

“You’re getting there, aren’t you. Okay, since you worked really hard today, you get a reward,” said Axel, and he started walking.

“We’re not going to—RTC?”

“Come with me. You remember the special place, don’t you?”

Axel knew Roxas was following behind, even without turning around.

xxx

The special place—the big clock tower on top of Twilight Town station.

You could look out over Twilight Town from there.

Axel sat down at the front of the tower, and looked up at Roxas, who was still standing.

“You sit down too,” he said, and Roxas sat down next to him.

“Here, a reward.”

And so, Axel gave Roxas a sea-salt ice cream.

Roxas stared at the ice cream.

“Do you remember what this ice cream is called?”

“Umm...”

Roxas tilted his head to one side, looking like he was thinking back.

“Seasalt ice cream—I told you before, right? Memorise it properly,” said Axel, gnawing on his ice cream. Roxas gnawed on his own ice cream, copying Axel.

“Salty—but sweet,” murmured Roxas.

“Roxas, you said the same thing recently, you know.”

“Did I—I don’t really remember all that well...”

Roxas turned his gaze vaguely at the sunset.

His hair was moving in the wind.

“Come to think of it, it’s been about a week since you joined the Organisation, hasn’t it?”

“Maybe...” said Roxas, eyes still on the sunset.

“Maybe...? Don’t you remember that, either?”

Roxas’ gaze dropped.

“Well, it means you finally get to go on missions like a real Organisation member.”

“Organisation member...”

Roxas was making a weird face for some reason.

“That makes today the beginning, or something, maybe.”

“The beginning—”

Roxas was looking at his ice cream again.

“If you don’t hurry up and eat it, it’ll melt on you.”

“—Okay.” Roxas bit his ice cream.

The clock tower’s bell rang out, telling the time, and a train was running in the distance.

This was Twilight Town.

And this clock tower—was still a special place only to Axel.

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Continue to [Chapter 2: Seasalt Icecream](#)

## Chapter 2: Seasalt Icecream

**Written by:** Kanemaki Tomoco

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Missions were given one at a time from Saïx, every day.

On the 9<sup>th</sup> day, Roxas' mission was with Marluxia. It was at Twilight Town, same as the day before. There wasn't much sign of people. Just the setting sun, shining over the town.

It seemed like missions—or rather, training—was to continue in that town for a while yet.

“You're Roxas, aren't you. Let's re-introduce ourselves. My name is Marluxia. I'm Number XI,” said Marluxia, in a gentle tone, looking at Roxas.

It was the first time he'd brushed with a keyblade wielder, even in his memories. He'd heard of them, though.

As a Nobody, he couldn't see anything special about the boy standing in front of him.

“What should I do today?” said Roxas, his gaze shifting slightly from Marluxia.

“Today, your mission is to collect hearts. Can you bring out your keyblade?”

“—yeah,” Roxas nodded, and made the keyblade appear in his hand.

The blade, shaped like a giant key, shone in Roxas' hand.

It was the first time Marluxia had seen a keyblade.

“So you're Number XIII, the one chosen by the keyblade,” muttered Marluxia, without realising, but Roxas didn't show any special reaction.

Just then, as if called by the keyblade, a Heartless appeared.

The black-bodied thing was a Shadow, a low level Heartless.

“So the small fry have come out—Roxas, it’s sudden, but please show me the power of the keyblade. Defeat that Heartless.”

Whether he’d been listening or not, Roxas ran at the Heartless, keyblade in hand. There was no hesitation in his movements. Roxas swung the keyblade down at the Shadow, which faded away with a few blows. Marluxia had been hoping for strength that would bring a Shadow down in one blow, but as a yet newly-awakened Nobody, this was to be expected.

“The thing you just defeated was a Heartless called a Shadow.”

“...Heartless,” muttered Roxas, still gripping the keyblade.

“The Heartless are beings of darkness that roam about, searching for hearts. There are two kinds of Heartless. One is the Pureblood type, such as the one you just defeated. Hearts do not emerge from Pureblood Heartless, even once defeated.”

“So how are hearts gathered?”

“Defeat Emblem Heartless. Those ones.”

Little Heartless had appeared in the air in front of them.

“Got it.”

Once more, Roxas ran into the throng of Heartless.

His agility wasn’t good, as expected. Just then, from a defeated Heartless, a heart floated up and vanished into the air.

It was the first time Marluxia had seen a ‘heart’ being collected before his very eyes.

*If those hearts could be collected... but before that, there’s something that must be done.*

*Even so—the keyblade has marvellous power.*

*If that power was in my hands...*

Roxas defeated all of the Heartless. He turned back, breathing hard.

“Is that okay?”

The keyblade disappeared from his hand.

“Yes—the things you defeated this time were Emblem Heartless. Unlike with those Shadows from before, after defeating them, somebody’s heart emerged, didn’t it. Today’s mission is to collect those hearts.

“How are those hearts collected?”

Marluxia was a little surprised at Roxas’ question.

*How can a keyblade wielder not know such a thing?*

“If you defeat Heartless with your keyblade, they get collected.”

“...What happens to the collected hearts?”

The continuous questions showed that Roxas didn’t know a thing.

Marluxia took a breath, and told him.

“They gather in the great Kingdom Hearts.”

“Kingdom Hearts?” Roxas tilted his head.

*I haven’t seen the real thing, either. But the name, as the ‘outcome of research’, was let known to me.*

“The goal of our Organisation is to complete Kingdom Hearts. In order to do so, we must gather hearts.”

“Gather hearts—so, everyone else in the Organisation is gathering hearts too, I guess.”

“Only the keyblade can free hearts completely.”

“Huh?” Roxas’ voice rose, as if he was surprised.

“We—in other words, except for you, when those of the Organisation defeat Heartless, the hearts aren’t collected. The released heart will, in due course, become a Heartless again. Heart collection is something special that cannot be performed with anything but the keyblade you wield.”

“Something special...”

Roxas' gaze dropped to the ground, as if he were thinking.

*It appears that they really haven't let Roxas know anything. Is he not being told? And, are these things that Roxas should be learning from now on? When Saïx put me in charge of this mission, I did not receive any special instructions. All he said was to teach him how to gather hearts.*

"For the sake of our Organisation, defeat Heartless, and complete the great Kingdom Hearts—we're counting on you, Roxas," he said, and Roxas nodded.

xxx

He had just finished reporting to Saïx, in the lobby.

"It looks like you're progressing fairly well."

"...Yeah."

"Are you resting properly?"

"Resting?" Roxas asked.

"Whether you're sleeping properly or not. Keeping yourself clean also comes under resting. It's a mission to make sure you can perform on missions."

"Probably..."

Saïx wasn't very satisfied with Roxas' answer.

"Arranging equipment and understanding your own skills is the same thing. And so, from today, you are to keep a journal."

"Journal?"

"Yes, in order to understand yourself."

Saïx handed Roxas a notebook.

"You don't actually have to hand it in or anything. That is all. Go back to your room and rest," was all Saïx said, and he went ahead and left the lobby.

In the lobby, members who had finished their missions were talking and relaxing. Roxas watched the members, sensing a strange sort of feeling in the air.

In the lobby was—Larxene, Demyx, and Luxord.

"What are you looking at," Larxene sniped. Roxas looked away, flustered, and



met Demyx's eyes this time.

"You can't play some kinda instrument, can you?" Demyx said.

"Instrument? What's an instrument?"

"Like one of these."

A strangely shaped weapon appeared in Demyx's hands.

"What's that?"

"It's my sitar. Will you? Listen to this."

Demyx touched the weapon, and a strange sound rang out.

"Shut up with that noisy thing!" yelled Larxene, disagreeably, and Demyx shrugged his shoulders.

"Which one's noisier, anyway...?" Demyx mumbled, looking away.

"Huuuh? Did you say something, cranky-pants?" Larxene stood up from the sofa.

"...In life, such pleasures are necessary, too."

Luxord had slid in to stand in front of Larxene.

"Eh, whatever. I'll be saying goodbye to that racket soon enough."

"What do you mean?" asked Demyx, forgetting he had been yelled at.

"It's got nothing to do with peons like you. Later."

Larxene left the lobby.

Behind her, Demyx played his sitar once more.

"That woman is such a pain in the ass!"

"One of the finer points of the fairer sex, is it not?" said Luxord, stroking his beard.

"Don't really get you there, man. Right, Roxas?"

"I... don't really understand," replied Roxas.

*Women are a pain, I guess? I don't really understand what a woman is, anyway.*

“Ah, you’ll understand someday,” grinned Luxord.

xxx

The next day, Roxas was in Twilight Town again, with Zexion.

Zexion, who had been the youngest member of the Organisation until Roxas came, was watching Roxas’ movements, unwaveringly.

*If the keyblade did not exist, our plan would not succeed.*

*It’s contradictory, saying that we are searching to seek what we lost ourselves,* Zexion thought, recalling their former research. *I don’t think our choice to research the Heartless, and their creation process, was a mistake. But, as a consequence, we lost our own hearts.*

“Was that okay?” asked Roxas, who had finished his mission.

“Very good job. I hope that you will want to complete your next mission in such a positive manner, too. Is there anything you’d like to ask?” Zexion asked, and Roxas stopped moving.

Zexion had meant for Roxas to persistently ask questions about the mission, but the words that came from Roxas’ mouth were unexpected.

“What is Kingdom Hearts?”

Zexion hesitated for a moment on how he should answer.

But, Roxas continued, not noticing Zexion’s manner.

“Defeating Heartless and gathering hearts makes Kingdom Hearts, right? Are we going to do something, once we’ve made Kingdom Hearts?” Roxas asked, in rapid succession, and Zexion was lost in thought for a while.

*How should I answer...*

Roxas’ gaze was fixed right on Zexion.

“...The goal of our Organisation is to fuse with the people’s hearts of kingdom hearts, and become complete. All the members of the Organisation are nobodies, missing hearts—that is to say, since the time we were born into this world, we’ve lacked hearts.

*Of course, I wonder if he can understand that explanation.*

*And then, is it necessary to make Roxas understand?*

“So, does that mean I don’t have a heart, either?” Roxas asked, looking strange.

*Perhaps he still doesn’t understand what a ‘heart’ is yet.*

*Before, that me, who researched, and had a ‘heart’, thought he understood a little of what a ‘heart’ was.*

*The uplifting feelings from the time I had a ‘heart’, engraved in my memories, cannot be felt any more. Now I can only remember, and work hard to try and taste it once again.*

“Yes, that’s right. We members of the Organisation do not have hearts. That is why we seek them. Complete Kingdom Hearts, an aggregation of people’s hearts, and merge—in order for that to happen, Heartless must be defeated with the keyblade you wield, and hearts gathered. In order to achieve the Organisation’s goals, each member of the Organisation is given their own role. Your role is to defeat Heartless with the keyblade, and collect hearts.”

*But—I’ve heard that Roxas has no memories.*

*If so, it means he doesn’t have memories from the time he had a heart either, like we do. Perhaps even feeling that he has no ‘heart’ is difficult.*

Roxas listened to Zexion’s explanation, looking as if he was thinking about something to himself.

“Is there anything else you would like to ask?”

“...Ah, no.” Roxas shook his head.

*I wonder if Roxas understood about the ‘heart’—, Zexion thought suddenly, stepping into a corridor with Roxas.*

xxx

Having finished his mission, Marluxia called out to Axel.

“I heard that you’re coming to Castle Oblivion, too—”

“News travels fast.” Axel stopped walking, and looked back at Marluxia.

“Well, you and I have different missions. You’re going on matters of the

‘keyblade hero’, I see.”

“You’re well informed, aren’t you?”

“The members being made to go over there know that sort of thing,” he answered. Axel shrugged. “Aren’t you interested? In the keyblade hero.”

“Not especially.”

*That’s the truth. I’ve got no reason to have special interest.*

“Were you not showing interest in Roxas?”

“Can’t help it, I’m sort of in charge of him,” Axel answered, and turning his back on Marluxia, started walking.

But, the next words made him stop.

“So you wouldn’t be interested, even if you heard that Roxas is the Nobody of that keyblade hero—?”

Turning around without realising, Axel looked at Marluxia, eyes narrowed. It didn’t look like he was lying.

Seeing Axel’s state, Marluxia laughed. “How honest. Just like a human.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Perhaps it is a compliment, for what it means to have reactions as if one had a heart,” Marluxia said, a bewitching smile still pasted on his mouth.

“So? Is that all the business you have with me?” Axel asked. Marluxia gazed fixedly at Axel.

xxx

A few days later, Roxas was in Twilight Town with Axel.

“This is the second mission I’ve been on with you, isn’t it.”

“Yeah—” Roxas nodded, and gripped the keyblade.

Today’s mission was to gather hearts, too. It boiled down to Heartless extermination.

“Will we go?”

Roxas broke into a run at the sound of Axel's voice.

*I thought he'd have done heaps of missions by now, but I heard from Saix that this is the first real one.*

Roxas was moving with far more agility than the first day he'd gone on a mission, and behind him, Axel was acting as back-up, throwing his chakrams at Heartless.

*We Organisation members, other than Roxas, can't get hearts even if we defeat Heartless.*

*In other words, when I go out on a 'heart gathering' mission with Roxas, supporting him becomes my role.*

But Roxas was running, swinging the keyblade, without even looking back at Axel. His movements were pretty admirable. When he had gathered enough hearts, Roxas finally turned back to Axel.

"That's it, isn't it."

"...Yeah."

The keyblade vanished from Roxas' hand.

Beads of sweat stood out on Roxas' forehead, as he steadied his heavy breathing.

"So what do we do now?" asked Axel, in a light tone.

"What do we do...? I planned on reporting to Saix and then sleeping in my room, like always."

*Close, but no cigar.*

Axel peered into Roxas' face, scratching his head.

"You know, Roxas..."

Just then, the town's children—the three from before—ran past Axel and Roxas.

"Hurry up, Pence!"

"Wait~!"

“Loser treats the winner to ice cream, you know!”

*Seems like Roxas and those kids are destined to run into each other or something.*

“Just now...?”

Roxas was watching the children’s backs strangely.

He didn’t seem to remember that he had seen them the first time he had been with Axel.

“That was the town’s children, just now.”

“Hmm...”

Roxas narrowed his eyes. Axel was surprised by his reaction.

“Do they all do that?”

“That...?”

Axel didn’t really understand what Roxas meant.

“Running around in a pack like that, and, making noise—” Roxas asked, and Axel thought that his expression was a little different than it had been up until then.

*Perhaps he’s remembering something from his past, when he spent time like that.*

“That’s... something people with hearts do, I guess?”

“A heart, is it...”

Roxas hung his head, and looked at the ground. Axel scratched his head, sensing some kind of pain-in-the-ass atmosphere in the silence.

And then he said, “Will we have some ice cream, too?”

“Why?”

“Why...? Cause...”

*I don’t know what I should say.*

*I just want to eat ice cream and talk with Roxas in that place like we did the*

*day we met, that's all, but I'm getting the feeling that I've gotta dress it up in different words or something.*

*Roxas probably—wouldn't understand, if I didn't.*

After taking a breath, Axel said, "Because we're friends, see."

*Saying it is really freaking embarrassing. But, saying it out loud gives it significance.*

*And I couldn't think of any other excuses.*

"Friends..."

"Friends eat ice cream together, talk about stupid things and laugh, that sort of stuff. Like those guys from before, for example."

Roxas looked up at Axel, a strange look on his face.

"Alright, let's go."

Axel started walking towards the milkbar, as if he were fleeing from Roxas' gaze.

xxx

Children were talking to each other in the open space in front of the clock tower.

*Does that condition have deep meaning?*

Roxas watched them as he ate his ice cream.

*I can feel a greater sense of self from Roxas than he had the day we first met, or the day of his first mission.*

*But, it's still hollow and cold, somehow. That's something all nobodies have in common.*

"Hey, Roxas."

Roxas lifted his face.

*What was I going to say, again?*

"When we've finished a mission, let's eat ice cream here again. It's boring to just go back and forth between the castle and missions, right?"

*Even I'm surprised at those lines.*

*Just like the things I said before, even I wasn't expecting it. But, it just popped out of my mouth automatically.*

Roxas looked at the children in the open space again, with a strange look on his face.

"Yeah—friends, right..."

*It was probably just my imagination, but I thought I saw Roxas smile just a little.*

"Well, I won't be able to eat ice cream here for a little while, though."

"Huh...?"

Roxas' eyes went wide.

"It's been decided that I'm going to Castle Oblivion for a while, starting tomorrow."

"Castle Oblivion..."

"You still don't know anything but Twilight Town, do you? But there are heaps of worlds out there, and the Organisation has a castle in another in-between world. That's Castle Oblivion. Got it memorised?"

"...So there are places like that..." Roxas looked down. "When do you come home?"

"Hm—I wonder when. When I'm back, let's eat ice cream here again."

"...Okay."

Roxas' gaze followed a train, running in the distance.

"Well, I've gotta head back soon. Heaps of stupid things to get ready."

"Oh, then I'll also—"

"You relax and eat your ice cream. See ya."

Axel stood up, opening darkness on the side of the clock tower, and his figure vanished.

Roxas was left alone.



“...It’s salty...” Roxas muttered, gnawing on his ice cream.

Just then, Roxas saw that something was written on the ice cream stick, and put the rest in his mouth in one go.

“What is this...”

‘Winner’ was written on the finished ice cream stick.

xxx

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## Chapter 3: Roxas and Xion

**Written by:** Kanemaki Tomoco

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**Illustration:** Amano Shiro

**Translations:** Goldpanner

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xxx

*I've gone to Castle Oblivion many times, now.*

*There's a special place in that castle. But there aren't many Organisation members who know of it.*

Axel arranged his clothes, and left his room.

*I won't see this room for a while.*

As he walked through the hallway, a voice came from behind. "Axel, a message from Lord Xemnas."

Saïx.

He turned in silence to find Saïx watching him, expressionlessly.

"There are traitors amongst the members going to Castle Oblivion. Find and dispose of them."

Axel could hear something round-a-bout in the way Saïx was speaking.

*There aren't any other members around, so it's not necessary for him to go to the trouble of saying something like that in that way. Axel's eyes narrowed slightly. But then, Saïx does like to use that kind of indirect, noncommittal way of speaking.*

"I wonder, is that message really from Lord Xemnas?" Axel said, words tumbling out.

Saïx only raised both eyebrows, and said, "It's the same thing either way, isn't it?"

“Not exactly,” Axel pointed out, and Saïx sighed.

“It doesn’t matter. Go take care of the traitors.”

“Roger that,” said Axel, turning his back on Saïx and walking away.

*There are six members going to Castle Oblivion, including myself. How many are traitors? And, what defines ‘traitor’?*

*I’m supposed to judge everything for myself, am I.*

*What the hell is going to happen at Castle Oblivion? This is getting interesting.*

Unknowingly, Axel’s mouth was twisting into a grin.

xxx

Waking up, Roxas stuffed the ice cream stick he’d left next to his pillow into his pocket, and left his room.

He wanted to know the meaning of that ‘winner’ word he had found written on it yesterday.

Rushing into the lobby, Roxas looked around. He didn’t see Axel.

“Axel...”

“If you’re after Axel, he’s already gone,” said Saïx, passing by Roxas.

“Huh...” Roxas squeezed the ice cream stick in his pocket. *It looks like I wasn’t in time to see him off.*

“Did you need him for something?” asked Saïx, glancing at Roxas.

“Not really...” Roxas looked down, so as to keep his eyes away from Saïx.

“Whatever. You’re going on a mission with Xion today.”

“...With Xion?” Roxas lifted his face. Xion, was in a corner of the lobby, hood up. “...Got it,” he nodded, but there was no reaction from Xion, whether listening or not. “Let’s go,” Roxas called, but Xion didn’t move an inch, of course. Nothing for it, he opened the darkness beside him, and stepped inside.

At the edge of his vision, he saw Xion move.

*Looks like they’re actually following.*

Inside the dark corridor, he turned back, to find Xion had followed him, hood still up.

Not feeling like there was anything special to say, Roxas continued walking.

*Today's mission is, like always, in Twilight Town.*

xxx

Roxas gripped the keyblade. Running up Twilight Town's slope, he routed some plant-type Heartless.

*Xion is following me, but not doing a thing. Not holding a weapon, or using magic. Just zoned out and rooted to the ground.*

A plant-type Heartless spat out a seed which hit Xion, who fell to the ground, not even crying out. Roxas hesitated for a moment as to whether or not he should help, but then he swung the keyblade down on the Heartless that was still spitting seeds.

As the Heartless disappeared, a heart floated up.

"—that's all, I think." Xion just stood up, not even reacting to Roxas' words. Xion's black coat was dirtied with dust, but didn't even brush it off.

*That was pretty weird, but we still managed to finish the mission safely.*

"I have to drop by somewhere first, so would you... go ahead and RTC?"

Without so much as a nod, Xion started walking, probably heading for the dark corridor.

Roxas turned his back on Xion, and headed for the milkbar in the tram plaza.

*I finished the mission, and I want to eat ice cream.*

*It's boring to just go back and forth between the castle and missions.*

"...One sea salt ice cream," Roxas said to the lady at the milkbar.

"Okay, that's 20 munny, then."

Roxas handed over two 10 munny coins, and received an ice cream wrapped in a clear sheet.

*You know, this is the first time I've bought an ice cream at a shop.*

*Axel always buys it for me.*

Roxas went to walk away, ice cream in hand, but then suddenly he stopped.

The stick from yesterday was in his pocket.

Roxas held it out in front of the lady. "What does this mean?"

"Oh, that's a winner! Congratulations!"

"Congratulations...?"

He'd never been told that word before.

"I'll give you one more ice cream."

"What about the munny...?"

*I don't really understand what 'give' means.*

*You get things in exchange for a number of munny or hearts, I've definitely heard that.*

"Don't worry about it. You won! Have you got a friend to share it with?"

"...I do, but... he's not here today," said Roxas, thinking of Axel.

"Well then, you should use it when you can eat with your friend. You'll get a stomach ache if you eat two ice creams on your own, dear."

"With my friend... I get it."

*When Axel's come back, I'll show him this stick and we'll eat ice cream together.*

Ice cream in hand, Roxas started walking towards the clock tower.

xxx

Castle Oblivion lay in the world between worlds.

The world between worlds referred to a world that belonged to neither the realm of light nor the realm of darkness, and sat between the two. A space left to beings that did not exist, not of light and not of dark, as it were. It was a dusky world wrapped in mist, with a road that stretched right through it. Members of the Organisation were able to set foot in formerly separated worlds by travelling the pathless track called the dark corridor from that world between worlds.

In a particular room in Castle Oblivion, Axel was sitting on a sofa. It was pretty much the same make as that of the one in the lobby in the Castle That Never Was, right down to the uncomfortableness.

Castle Oblivion was an unpleasant place.

Each floor of the castle, divided into upstairs and basement sections, was controlled by memory; shape changing in accordance to the memories of those who entered the rooms.

And, there was a memory-manipulating witch in the castle who wasn't allowed to leave—Naminé.

*The Organisation is going ahead with a plan to rewrite the Hero's memories, using Naminé's power.*

*In truth, Naminé is neither Heartless nor human. Maybe she isn't even a Nobody.*

*A witch born by special means—that's right, a girl born from a princess's heart.*

Axel watched the crystal ball across from him, one that Marluxia had left in the middle of the room.

The crystal ball showed the Keyblade Hero, Sora.

*The power of a keyblade wielder is necessary to the Organisation, seeking hearts.*

*But, we already have a keyblade wielder—Roxas. I think the Organisation is trying to get another one.*

*What is a keyblade, anyway?*

*They say only special people can use them, but at least two keyblade wielders—both Roxas and Sora, a Nobody and a human—have been confirmed to be able to.*

Marluxia, who had been watching the crystal ball, turned to Axel. “Oh yes. How are the basement group getting along?”

Covering up a jolt, Axel stood up.

*There seem to be tensions between the upstairs group—newcomers with Marluxia and Larxene as centre— and the basement group—Zexion, Vexen and Lexaeus, senior members of the Organisation and former apprentices of Ansem the Wise. As a newcomer I’ve been assigned to the upstairs group, and I’ve been keeping watch on the basement group according to Marluxia’s orders.*

“Looks like the basement group has company as well. Riku—you heard that name before?”

*I’ve heard that Riku has previously been controlled by Xehanort’s Heartless, formerly known as Ansem. Xehanort... in other words, someone extremely close to Xemnas.*

“Ho... one who was piled with darkness...”

“So you do know.”

*The castle was suddenly thrown into a flurry since we received reports that Sora had invaded the upstairs, and Riku the basement.*

“I wonder what they’re up to.”

“Weeell... you know about the research they’re doing down in the basement, right?”

*Just because we’re assigned to the same castle, doesn’t mean every member knows all of the goals and missions in this place. When it comes down to it, the members of the Organisation act independently.*

“You’re speaking of Vexen’s worthless research?”

“Well, I dunno whether it’s worthless.”

“I can’t see how those dolls can be useful. Well then—I must be going. The Hero is present,” said Marluxia, and his figure vanished.

Even inside Castle Oblivion, members of the Organisation could move via the dark corridors.

Following Marluxia, Axel’s figure also disappeared.

xxx

The next morning, Roxas entered the lobby to find Demyx and Xigbar standing

around Xion, talking about something in the middle of the lobby.

“Feels much better with those annoying guys gone, doesn’t it?” Demyx asked Xion, but Xion’s mouth didn’t open, hood up as always.

“Annoying guys...?” asked Roxas, walking up, and Demyx shrugged.

“The guys who went to Castle Oblivion,” said Demyx, looking at Xigbar as if seeking agreement.

“You know, you and poppet joined pretty much when those guys left for Castle Oblivion, didn’t you.”

Roxas tilted his head at the unfamiliar name. “Poppet?”

“I’m talking about Xion, kiddo,” said Xigbar, amused for some reason.

“Kiddo...?”

*Does he mean me?*

Just as he was thinking this, someone interrupted.

“Roxas, mission.”

It was Saïx.

“Today you’re also going to Twilight Town with Xion, on Heartless extermination.”

“...Got it,” Roxas replied, but of course Xion didn’t answer. It didn’t seem like Saïx had any questions about Xion’s lack of a reply, though.

Roxas looked back at Xion, and opened a dark corridor.

*If I go my own way, I guess Xion will follow as they please.*

Turning back again, Xion was indeed following, just like yesterday.

xxx

The mission was to defeat the Heartless that appeared in Twilight Town’s vacant lot.

Without giving Xion any instructions, Roxas ran alone into the pack of Heartless, swinging his keyblade.



However, it was a little different to how yesterday had been.

From the middle of the scuffle, Xion, using a little magic, entered the field of vision.

Xion wasn't just standing around idly like last time.

Upon finishing the last Heartless, Roxas realised Xion was looking his way.

"I've got somewhere I have to drop by today, too, so would you go ahead and RTC?" said Roxas, and he started walking.

Then.

"Ro...xas..."

"Huh?" He turned; it was the first time he'd heard that voice. "Xion...?"

It was a girl's voice. Hood still up, Xion didn't move at all.

Just when Roxas was thinking it must have been his imagination, Xion opened her mouth again.

"Roxas... can I call you that?"

*What else is there to call me.*

"Yeah," he answered, and Xion nodded, going off to enter the dark corridor.

"Roxas... right..." he muttered subconsciously, as if he were having second thoughts, and headed for the milk bar.

xxx

The Keyblade Hero's party—Sora, Donald and Goofy—faced the hooded Marluxia.

*Readying the keyblade like that, Sora really does look like Roxas,* thought Axel, furtively studying the situation while concealing himself.

Castle Oblivion—Floor 1.

"...How was it? Did you enjoy meeting those visions from your memories?"

"I was happy that I could meet everyone. But, why are you showing me these visions?" Sora asked, and Marluxia folded his arms in thought. *He wants to try and touch Sora, if he can,* thought Axel.

*It's definitely not in Marluxia's plan for me to show myself here.*

*But...*

Axel appeared next to Marluxia.

"What do you want," asked Marluxia, disagreeable as predicted.

"It's boring, you keeping the hero all to yourself," answered Axel, bending forwards and looking at Sora.

*They really do look alike...*

Sora was glaring at Axel and Marluxia with all his might.

"You test him, if you're interested." Marluxia threw three cards to Axel.

"Oh hey—it's ok? I'll be sharp," replied Axel, jokingly, and Marluxia disappeared without a word.

"—Wait!" Sora ran forwards, as if to chase after the vanished Marluxia. However, Axel stood before him, blocking the way.

"So this is how it is, Keyblade Hero."

"Who are you." Sora readied his keyblade once more.

"My name is Axel. Got it memorised?"

*I said the same thing to Roxas, just a few days ago.*

"Axel..."

Sora straightened his back, and looked at Axel.

"That's great, you learn fast," laughed Axel, making his chakrams appear.

Behind, Donald readied his staff, and Goofy lifted his shield.

"Well then, Sora. You've gone and memorised it and all, so—don't let yourself get done in too easily!" Axel declared, and jumped at Goofy.

"Ahyuk?!"

He sent Goofy flying.

"Wak?!"

Following it up, he got the other one—Donald, flicking him back, staff and all,

forcing him to retreat.

Sora was left.

After taking a moment, Axel lifted his arm, and flames shot out.

The flames bore down on Sora, like a wall.

“You stay there like that, and you’ll be toast!”

Instead, at Axel’s attack, Sora called back his two retreated friends, Donald and Goofy, took them by the hand, and ran into the flames. They passed through the fire, spinning.

“You’re doing good, aren’t you?”

Sora ran at the laughing Axel, and swung the keyblade down. Axel parried the keyblade with his chakrams, but he vanished, pretending to have taken the hit.

*I don’t need to defeat Sora here. On the contrary, I must not defeat him.*

Still concealed, Axel threw the cards he’d received from Marluxia at Sora.

“..Am I supposed to use these, am I...”

“Correct,” answered Axel, re-appearing.

“Axel?!” Sora yelled. He seemed very surprised; he must have thought he’d defeated Axel.

“I’d be an idiot to go down right after an introduction like that, wouldn’t I?” said Axel, teasing Sora and the others.

“So you were only testing our power just now.” Sora readied the keyblade.

“You pass, Sora. You have power. The power to walk through Castle Oblivion... let the memories branded in your hearts, and the important, forgotten memories, guide you—and you’ll meet someone very important to you.

Goofy tilted his head. “Can we meet the King, and Riku?”

“I wonder. You have to have a big think about who your most important person is. The really important memories are locked deep in the heart, unable to be recalled. You should have those kinds of memories too, Sora.”

“Me too?” Sora loosened his grip on the keyblade.

While saying things to stir Sora up, Axel thought.

*Nobodies are controlled by memories. And because they control us, we stop being able to remember.*

*Maybe that has happened to me.*

*And, now, Sora has entered this castle and his memories are being complicated by Marluxia and the power of the witch—Naminé.*

*In this castle, we must replace Sora's memories.*

*Those words were part of the strategy.*

"You've lost sight of the light in the darkness, you're even forgetting that you've lost sight."

"Light, in the darkness..." Sora murmured. It seemed like he'd realised something.

"I can tell you, if you want," Axel invited, as a follow-up strike.

Goofy peered into Sora's face, doubtfully. "Sora, what'll we do?" he asked, but — "I'll find out for myself!" Sora declared, readying his keyblade again.

"—Good answer. That's why you're the Keyblade Hero, isn't it. But, I'll leave you with just this warning. When your sleeping memories awaken, you might not be you," Axel said, and vanished.

xxx

*It's been three days since Axel went away.*

Xion was standing in the same old lobby, like yesterday.

*No—it's a little different,* thought Roxas.

The moment Roxas had entered the lobby, Xion had moved a just a little, and she had looked over at him from under her hood... or so it had felt.

Roxas approached Xion, and spoke to her. "Morning, Xion."

Xion stayed stock still.

*It was probably my imagination that she reacted to me, then.*

Not knowing what he should do, Roxas was at a loss.

But—Xion was staring at him, definitely different to yesterday.

“Um... did you want something?” Those were the words that came out of his mouth, unthinking. *I greeted her and everything, but even so, even I think asking something like that is weird. But, I didn't know what to do.*

But—

“...Morning, Roxas.”

That was definitely a greeting.

He couldn't believe this was the same Xion from yesterday.

“Ah, yeah...” said Roxas, replying automatically, at a loss for words. Just then, Saïx broke in.

“Today, you two will be completing a mission of great importance for us. You'll be subjugating a huge Heartless.”

“A huge Heartless...”

*I've been on missions to defeat Heartless before, but this will be the first time I'll be subjugating a Heartless that could be called huge.*

“Don't let your guard down,” said Saïx, and Roxas nodded.

“Let's go, Xion.”

It looked like Xion nodded.

xxx

Roxas and company stepped out of the dark corridor, and into Twilight Town. At the open space at the top of the stairs, the sunset was dazzling.

“Roxas.”

Roxas turned back upon hearing the call, to find Xion staring at him.

*As always, I can't tell her expression under that hood—he was thinking, when.*

Showing from inside the hood was a black-haired girl.

*It's like—I've met her somewhere before, or something.*

*But this is the first time I've seen Xion's face.*

“Let’s do our best, today.”

Xion was smiling.

“Yeah—let’s go.”

*I don’t know where this huge Heartless is meant to be.*

*But, there aren’t many places in which a huge Heartless could move around.*

*There’s—in front of the station’s clock tower, for one.*

Roxas started running.

xxx

The station’s bell rang out just as they got there. As if the bell had been a signal, the air vibrated. And then, at the same time, something roared behind them.

Turning back reflexively, a pitch-black, human-shaped Heartless—a darkside—was appearing out of the ground.

“That’s the target Heartless... let’s go!”

Roxas called the keyblade to his hand. Fully appeared, the enemy was as big as the clock tower.

“Yeah,” Xion replied. *Xion hasn’t got a weapon in her hand, but, I guess she’ll support me with magic, like before.*

Roxas ran at the darkside.

Right on the darkside’s chest a heart-shaped hollow, uncannily showing the scenery on the other side. *Do darksides start attacking, looking for that lost heart?*

Roxas jumped, trying to shake off those useless thoughts, swinging the keyblade up, aiming at the darkside’s arm.

Swinging down, Roxas felt a definite response from the darkside’s body, wrapped in dark mist.

At the same time, from behind, Xion shot a fireball at the darkside’s head. It let out an eerie scream, and beat the ground with its fists. Darkness spread out in

the middle of the ground, widening with each impact.

“Ugh...”

Roxas, who had endured it somehow, ran at those beating fists, cutting down with the keyblade. But, at about the same time, the darkside’s arm sent Roxas and the keyblade flying.

“Oh no!”

The deflected keyblade skidded across the ground, stopping at Xion’s feet.

And then—in the next moment, the keyblade was being gripped in Xion’s hand.

“Huh...?”

In front of Roxas, still collapsed, Xion ran at the darkside, the keyblade in her hand, and made a big jump. The keyblade, swung down, delivered a fatal blow to the darkside.

Xion landed, and the darkside turned into black mist.

“—That surprised me...” muttered Roxas, standing up.

*Xion being able to use my weapon is kinda.*

*Members of the Organisation each have their own special weapon, but I haven’t heard anything about them being able to be used by other members.*

The keyblade teleported from Xion’s hand to Roxas’.

“You can use the keyblade too, can’t you, Xion.”

“I was—surprised, too.” Xion smiled, in a slightly troubled way.

*It never even crossed my mind that someone other than me could use the keyblade.*

The keyblade sparkled in the palm of Roxas’ hand, then vanished as usual.

Roxas felt weird.

He hadn’t thought that something like this could happen; finding out something, and ending the mission on a slightly fun note.

*At a time like this—that’s right.*

“Well then Xion, you need a reward.”

“Huh?” asked Xion, with a surprised face. “A reward...?”

“A special place... before that, I gotta get ready to go to the special place.”  
Roxas smiled at Xion. “Wait here, okay.”

“Wait a second, Roxas—”

Roxas ran off in the direction of the milk bar.

xxx

Roxas bought two ice creams, went back to the open space in front of the station, and took Xion up the clock tower.

*I almost thought I'd use the 'winner', but I rethought it; of course I'm going to use it when Axel comes back.*

“I didn't know... there was a place like this,” voiced Xion.

“Sit down.”

“—Okay.”

Xion sat down at the front of the clock tower. Her gaze seemed fixed in the distance—on the sunset.

“Okay, here you go.” Roxas gave Xion an ice cream.

“What's this...?” Xion stared at the ice cream, a weird expression on her face.

“Sea salt ice cream. Try it.”

“Okay...” Xion took a small bite of the ice cream. “It's sweet, and... salty,” she murmured.

“But tasty, right? Me and Axel eat ice cream here after missions,” explained Roxas, taking a bite of his ice cream, too.

*A salty and sweet, special ice cream.*

“Cause Axel... likes this ice cream.”

He spoke of his friend, who had gone far away on a mission. And then, Xion looked at him, smiling. “You like it too, don't you?”



“Yeah,” Roxas nodded, and ate more ice cream. “When I first joined the Organisation, I ate ice cream here with Axel. And then, after my first mission, he gave me ice cream, calling it a reward.”

“...Like you did, just now?”

“Yeah.”

*I don't really know what 'reward' actually means, but I think it's definitely a special thing, like 'winner'. And so, when Axel comes back, I'll give him the 'winner' as a 'reward'.*

Xion, eating ice cream beside him, swung her feet.

“You two are really close, aren't you,” she said.

Roxas didn't know what to say for a second—but he found the answer right away.

“Because Axel's my friend.”

“...Do you think I could become your friend, too?” said Xion, looking at Roxas, and tilting her head to one side.

“When Axel's come back, let's eat ice cream together, the three of us,” replied Roxas, gnawing on his ice cream.

*Axel will definitely come back soon. And then, the three of us should eat ice cream together.*

*I don't know if Xion can become my friend, but—but, it feels like it would be okay.*

xxx

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## Chapter 4: Castle Oblivion

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**Translations:** Goldpanner

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xxx

Castle Oblivion, basement floor ten.

“So you’re Riku.” Vexen had been lying in wait for Riku, who had just arrived on the floor.

*If we did things according to my research, it would theoretically be possible to transfer memories and abilities to a doll without the power of the witch.*

*Yes—according to my replica project.*

“Who are you—a friend of Ansem’s?”

“A friend of Ansem’s—that’s half right, I suppose. But I’ll tell you this, he’s different to the Ansem you know. He’s Ansem, but then he’s not... that is to say, he’s ‘nobody’.” Vexen closed in on Riku.

*I can sense a mighty dark power in Riku. Perhaps that power could exceed even that of the Keyblade Hero.*

“He’s nobody? Huh—I’m in a really bad mood right now. Be clearer.”

“A being that walks the twilight, belonging to neither darkness nor light? Heh heh heh... have you noticed? That’s right, just like the one in this realm between darkness and light; you. I’m the same. In other words, we are fellow similar beings.”

“—Maybe.” Riku casually levelled the Soul Eater. “So what. You’re going to say ‘join me’, or something? Like you said, there’s dark power left in me. But the darkness is my enemy! And, reeking of darkness, so are you.”

“Hey. You’d really do it, wouldn’t you. But I have hope! Keep me company!”

*A battle is a way to obtain Riku’s powers. I am primarily a researcher, and the odds are against me, but—there’s no other way.*

*If I can only draw out his maximum power while he’s right in front of me, that will suffice.*

*If I could mass produce replicas, the Organisation would acquire even more power than present.*

*For they are not a breed of Emblem Heartless.*

Riku swung the Soul Eater down, which Vexen deflected with his ice shield.

“Show me your rage—and the power of the darkness within you!”

*With every swing of his blade, his power and memories are being accumulated—as data.*

“I’m—I’m...!”

“You still cannot stop yourself from using your dark powers—let’s go.”

Facing Riku, Vexen moved in to a suitable proximity, and swung his shield down. Riku handled the attack with ease. “Excellent!” yelled Vexen, unconsciously.

“...So this is part of your plan,” said Riku, looking displeased, still holding out the Soul Eater.

“Thanks to your hot headedness, I was able to take useful data for my research. Many thanks, Riku,” said Vexen, and disappeared, leaving a loud laugh behind him.

*Now all I have to do is plant these memories into that doll, for a start...*

xxx

“It looks like Sora’s memories have started to take root, right on target,” giggled Larxene, watching Sora in the crystal ball.

Axel also looked up, looking at Larxene with a slight smile. “The plan continues, then. Let’s see how far he goes.”

*The fake memories have started to take root inside Sora. In order for Sora to move the way the Organisation wants him to, his memories are being repainted little by little, the real ones being lost.*

*Fragments of memory are awfully vague things. They waver at the slightest chance.*

*Being able to make them waver, and weave new ones, is Naminé's power.*

*But, that too is something planned under the power of the Organisation.*

"Better go cut the next deal."

"Wait—you had your fun on the first floor, didn't you? That makes it my turn now," Larxene asserted, with a bewitching smile.

"...Don't break him," were the words that slipped unconsciously out of Axel's mouth.

"Huuuuh, what a soft thing to say."

"He's half one of us," said Axel, but for a second he wondered—what that actually meant.

*Was I talking about Sora, who we're about to use, or half of him—no, Sora's Nobody—Roxas?*

"You don't trust me, do you. I'm not so stupid as to play with the toy until it breaks," Larxene shrugged.

*That reminds me—I'm still not sure who the traitors are.*

"Just making sure, you know. That kid's a brat, you know—one we need to take control of the Organisation," Axel laughed, setting a trap.

*We—I wasn't definitely talking about Larxene and I. But, Larxene might interpret it as 'us'. Not lying.*

And then, Larxene answered—

"Aren't you saying too much? Keep the real target a secret until the final moment, you know."

Saying only that, Larxene disappeared. She had headed off to where Sora was.

“You’re the one who says too much, Larxene,” murmured Axel, alone in the room. It had been that easy to find evidence on a traitor.

xxx

Alone in a dim research room, Vexen’s unwavering gaze was fixed on a crystal ball.

Basement eighth floor. In the crystal ball, two boys with the same face were facing each other.

Riku, and the Riku=Replica—the fruit of Vexen’s research, a doll.

There were many in-progress dolls. Many methods of inputting data in order to copy shape and movement were also being prepared. It was still in experimental stage, however, it seemed to Vexen, looking at the Riku=Replica in the crystal ball, that it had reached completion.

In the crystal ball, the Replica was thrown back by Riku.

“Hey, fake—didn’t you say ‘you can’t beat me’?”

Riku walked casually up to the Replica, pressing the Soul Eater into its throat.

“Huh—I was only just born. I’ll only get stronger from here. I’ll even top you, soon. The next time we fight will be your last,” bragged the Replica.

*That’s right—the replicas grow. Experience is necessary for growth.*

*It is necessary to make it fight with an even stronger being.*

Staring at the crystal ball, Vexen smiled thinly.

xxx

*Larxene lost to Sora. She says she’d intended to lose from the beginning, but it was a clear retreat.*

*However, because of Larxene’s actions, Sora’s memories of Princess Kairi and Naminé the witch were mixed up, and he’s started thinking that Naminé, who he’s never even met, is very important to him.*

*Watching the hero move, I think of Roxas. Of Roxas’ movements—*

Axel thought anew about the connection between the Nobody and the true

form.

*Also, Vexen and his doll—replica—are here now.*

Vexen's doll looked completely different to the shape he had seen when he'd investigated the basement, now taking the shape of a silver-haired boy—probably Riku.

*I've definitely heard that replicas gain powers depending on memories. But I'll bet no one but Vexen would have been able to tell that such an elaborate thing was a replica.*

"How shameful, to have been driven back by such a lowly person. A disgrace to the Organisation."

Larxene ignored him. "What do you want, Vexen. Your post is the basement, isn't it?"

Originally, Axel would have wondered why Vexen, who should be in charge of the basement, would come upstairs, suspicious that perhaps he wanted to test the replica's performance. However, Axel himself also felt like seeing the replica perform.

"I came to lend a hand. That hero you think so highly of—I personally can't imagine he's of any use. Is he really of value...? Experimentation is necessary."

"Pfft, that's so like you. To cut it short, you won't be satisfied until you've done your experiments, am I right?"

"That is the instinct of a scientist."

To the side of Larxene and Vexen's exchange, the Replica was watching the crystal ball. It showed Sora and his gang.

"I don't really mind, but, you know. While you test Sora, you want to test out your own servant, don't you," said Axel, glancing at the Replica.

"He's not a servant. Let's call him a product of research."

"You mean a toy, right," said Larxene, cutting across Vexen.

"Humph, such impudence from one who cannot comprehend."

"Whatever, it's fine. You came all this way for us. I'd like you to have a little

fun, too. A present to my senior. Use these, and the show gets even more interesting. Use this card.” Axel threw a card to Vexen.

“Witty, aren’t you. Well then—I shall put this to use.... Come.”

Vexen beckoned the Replica to the centre of the room, and went to cross it.

“That’s just a card, isn’t it? What can you do with that,” said the Replica, mingled cynicism in his tone.

“Memories of the place where Sora and Riku were born are hidden in that card,” Axel explained, looking closely at the Replica’s face.

“Using that card and Naminé’s power, you could have the real Riku’s same memories for yourself. You could even get to forget that you were a fake. In other words, we’ll do you a favour and remake your heart, so you’re the same as the real Riku,” Larxene said, happily.

“Wait a minute! Remake my heart? Riku’s a weakling, afraid of his own darkness. I don’t want that guy’s heart!” the Replica yelled.

*A portion of Riku’s memories must already be copied to the Replica. If those limits are pushed even higher, he’ll probably get even more powerful.*

“So it’s fine, then? Vexen. Didn’t you come to use Riku to test Sora’s true power?”

Vexen folded his arms, and thought for a bit. Then he said, “It must be done.”

“What?! So you’ll betray me, Vexen!” pressed the Replica.

“I thought I said it. That you’d be useful to me,” declared Vexen, coldly.

“It’s okay. It probably won’t hurt that much.”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

The Replica slashed at Larxene, but she sent him flying instead. “Silly~! There’s no way a fake could ever beat me. But don’t worry. Naminé will erase the memory of me crushing you. And what’s more, she’ll plant lovely memories into your heart. Even though they’re lies!”

“Stop—”

The Replica went to stand up, and Larxene charged, landing another blow.

The Replica hit the wall, and fainted.

“Well then, now it’s your turn, Naminé—” Axel called out to the girl sitting quietly in the corner.

“Okay...”

“Though, it’s possible to transfer memories without witches and the like,” said Vexen, taking the Replica up in his arms.

“Uh, no. She doesn’t just transfer memories, she rewrites them. I don’t reckon anyone but a witch could rewrite memories. Isn’t that right? Naminé.” Naminé nodded slightly at Larxene’s words. “Sora and this doll will come to love you, if you rewrite their memories. Aren’t you happy?”

Naminé didn’t answer.

xxx

The Replica’s memories were being rewritten—just like Sora’s.

“That’s a pretty awesome power you got there, Naminé,” Axel murmured to the girl standing next to him, as he watched the Replica sleep in a pod that looked like a flower bud.

“But—all I can do is rearrange fragments of memories. I can’t rearrange things that aren’t already there.”

“You mean, as long as the data’s there, you can make anything you like from it?” asked Axel.

*I’m sure the Organisation already has the technology to turn memories into data.*

“What’s more, I need a container.”

“A container, huh...”

*So in this case, container = Replica.*

“And on top of that—just like the things you Nobodies do are controlled by your memories, maybe the same thing will go and happen to the Replica.”

“What do you mean?”



“The heart...”

Just when Naminé seemed about to say something, Vexen entered the room.

“Haven’t you finished rewriting the Replica’s memories yet?” Vexen said, pressing. Naminé turned to him.

She cast her eyes down. “I’m still not finished. If the spiral of memories collapses halfway through, perhaps the Replica will also collapse...”

“But, unfortunately, Larxene says that Sora has arrived on the floor.” Vexen tapped on the keyboard in front of the pod. The pod door opened slowly, and the Replica awakened.

xxx

Naminé watched the Replica fight Sora, right until the end.

“The heart goes out to him, doesn’t it,” said Axel, from behind her.

Naminé lifted her face, and looked at Axel. A light that made him sense her own will was beginning to form in her eyes.

*What is she planning to do...*

Axel stared right back at her. “Stop that. We nobodies can never be somebody,” he warned.

Naminé looked down. She was gripping a sketchbook in her hands.

*Marluxia, who is planning to manipulate the hero, is doing it right. And the basement crew, who have brought out this Replica in order to compete, aren’t doing it wrong either.*

*If so, then which one should I, who doesn’t belong to either, make the best use of? In particular the Replica, or the Hero? On top of that, over anyone else, if I don’t make use of Naminé, control of this castle will be impossible.*

*I’m pretty interested in what Naminé was saying in front of the Replica just before.*

“Hey Naminé—there isn’t anything else you can do, is there?”

Naminé turned her face up to Axel, looking frightened.

“Hey—Fake... no, Riku.”

Axel appeared in front of the Replica, who had lost to Sora once again.

*He doesn't have any memories of being a replica any more. He's so sure that he's Riku.*

“What do you want.”

Sweat ran down his forehead.

*He even sweats, even though he's a doll.*

“The Hero was strong, wasn't he?” smirked Axel, putting a hand on the Replica's shoulder. “Naminé says that strong's her type, too.”

The Replica looked down, biting his lip.

*Just like a human boy, with a heart.*

“What do you think, Riku? Do you want to try getting even stronger?”

“What do you mean.” The Replica looked at Axel with suspicious eyes. Axel threw a card to the Replica. It hit him in the chest, and fluttered to the ground.

*That doesn't have anything to do with memories; it's the key to a room in Castle Oblivion.*

*If a card is held up to a door, a new world opens up. It's only connected to the room Sora is in.*

*From now on, I'll guide the Replica, in order to make it a piece under my control, rather than have Vexen pulling the strings.*

“If you use this card, you can get even stronger.”

“Why are you helping me,” asked the Replica, staring at the card on the floor.

“Cause I wanna see the Hero defeated too, yanno.”

*Even a replica could probably see through a lie like that. But, I don't care. A replica planted with fake Riku memories should want power, no matter what. Because, that's what gives this replica's existence meaning.*

“Well, let's go—Riku.”

Seeming to have made up his mind, the Replica picked up the card.

xxx

A room in Castle Oblivion's upper levels.

The state of affairs was opposite to how it had been after Larxene's fight with Sora. This time, Larxene was scolding Vexen.

Even as he paid attention to the situation, Axel was watching Naminé, sitting frightened in the corner.

*I wonder how much Naminé understands about that Replica.*

"Whatcha gonna do, Vexen? You said Riku would listen to you, but where has he gone now? What's he doing?"

The Replica had gone missing after his fight with Sora. Well, in reality, he had fought Sora, lost, and then disappeared after Axel's sweet-talking. There was no way Vexen or Larxene knew this, though.

"He's hidden on purpose in order to lure Sora. Larxene, you should know this!" said Axel.

Larxene clapped her hands together joyfully. "Ohhh~? Of course! I didn't realise~. Excuuuuse me. I just can never work out whether Vexen's research is any use or not, you know~," Larxene jeered.

"Shut it!" Vexen was nearly trembling with rage.

"Huh... you're just cranky cause it's true. It's so simple to everyone else, you know~"

Vexen's shield appeared in his hand. "If I may say a word—"

Just then—Marluxia, who had disappeared off somewhere for a short while, appeared before them, breaking them up.

"Stop." Larxene and Vexen stopped moving. "Vexen, the fact is, your strategy failed. It's over. Do not disappoint us again," stated Marluxia, looking down at Vexen.

*At least, after seeing the resulting Replica, I think Vexen's strategy—or rather, his project—was completed, but I guess they don't need a doll that won't do*

*what the Organisation wants.*

“Disappoint you—it’s gone to your head! In this Organisation, *you* are number XI. I, Number IV, won’t stand for being dictated to by the likes of you!” Vexen clutched his shield.

“However, I am the one who has been entrusted this Castle, and Naminé. To oppose me in this place will be considered treason against the Organisation.” Marluxia glared at Vexen.

“And traitors are destroyed. Those are the rules~” said Larxene happily, standing beside him.

*That’s right; the Organisation does not leave those that turn against us alive.*

*Those are the rules.*

“I speak in the name of the Organisation. Your strategy failed. Let us inform the Superior of this blunder.”

“Wha—wait, for only that! Surely you can forgive such a small thing!” Vexen begged, with enough force that he seemed about to fall to his knees. Seeing that, Larxene’s mouth twisted into a smirk. Vexen, head down, wouldn’t have been able to see that smile.

“There is one condition.”

Vexen looked up. “A condition?”

“Destroy Sora by your own hand.”

“What?!” Vexen half-shouted, and stopped moving.

*Vexen probably couldn’t have imagined an order like that.*

*Larxene looks a little surprised, too.*

“Are you complaining?” Marluxia pressed, an elegant smile rising on his face.

“No—but... why... you really don’t mind?”

“No more arguments from you,” said Marluxia, cutting down Vexen’s uneasy question. Silence stretched out in the tense atmosphere.

“You serious about this?” asked Larxene, breaking the silence. However,

Marluxia didn't answer. Perhaps taking Larxene's reminder as an opportunity, Vexen disappeared.

"If you threaten him like that, he's gonna seriously destroy Sora, you know."

*Marluxia probably issued the command in order to get Vexen, not Sora, destroyed,* guessed Axel.

*Marluxia isn't that stupid.*

"And that is an outcome no one desires," said Marluxia, walking to a corner of the room.

Naminé looked up in surprise, her shoulders trembling.

"So, what will you do? Your hero will be destroyed, if nothing happens. But I believe he made a certain promise to you. Didn't he, Naminé."

"...Yes," answered Naminé, in a small, thin voice.

xxx

Vexen took a blow from Sora, and fell to his knees.

"We did it!" Sora pumped his fist.

"Not quite—" muttered Vexen, getting slowly to his feet. "I cannot, of course, be disposed of that easily," Vexen stated, breezily, even though his face was twisted in pain.

"You can actually keep going?" shouted Donald, from behind Sora.

"I wonder? Haven't you noticed? That I was searching through your memories while we fought. And so... I found it! A card, made from memories from the sealed other side of your heart. If you want to fight me for real, step into the world born from this card!" Vexen threw a card to Sora.

Larxene, watching the events in the crystal ball, looked up at Marluxia.

"What's he mean?"

"That's... Twilight Town," Marluxia muttered; the name written on the card thrown to Sora.

Axel raised an eyebrow, deliberately.

“What is that guy trying to do,” wondered Larxene.

“Maybe he thinks fighting in a world he knows well will pay off?” Axel answered, folding his arms.

“Uh oh, has too much blood rushed to Vexen’s head? What you gonna do, Axel. It’d be terrible if Sora knew about his ‘other side’, wouldn’t it?”

*I wonder which side is really the ‘other’ one.*

*Is Sora the ‘other side’ of Roxas, the Nobody? Or is Roxas the ‘other side’ of Sora? Which is the true ‘other side’?*

*And, I wonder what Vexen intends to do.*

*Does this have something to do with his experiment?*

*What is he trying to do by interfering with Sora’s memories?*

*Why is Twilight Town in Sora’s memories?*

“If he only passes through, we can trick him somehow. But—” said Axel, hiding his unrest.

“I shall make a deal with Naminé. Axel, you go, too. You know what to do.”

*There’s no longer room for doubt as to what Marluxia is saying.*

“I don’t get you. I want to hear it from your lips,” grinned Axel, looking at Marluxia.

“Dispose of the traitors,” stated Marluxia, like it was nothing, and gave a put-on laugh.

“No taking that back, you know,” Axel confirmed one-sidedly, turned his back on Marluxia, and walked out of the room without using a dark corridor.

xxx

He headed down the hallway, towards the floor on which Sora was.

“Dispose of the traitors, hmm.”

*The traitors to the Organisation have just been made crystal clear.*

*Marluxia and Larxene are going to betray the Organisation. Vexen’s position is only respected because of his stupid research, and I don’t think research has*

*any meaning in the power games within the Organisation. There's still the basement crew, but it's too soon to judge just yet.*

*Now's not the time to think about whether it's right or wrong to take care of Vexen.*

*That's all I can do if I don't want to get into a disadvantageous position with Marluxia and Larxene. If I think of it as self-defence, it's just something that can't be helped. Even so, I wonder why Vexen would go to the trouble of making Twilight Town appear.*

*Because of him, even the Replica is headed for Twilight Town.*

*If worst comes to worst, and Sora finds out about Roxas, I wonder what'll happen.*

*What would a human do, if they found out about their own Nobody?*

*If Sora is destroyed, Roxas will probably also be destroyed.*

*There's no way around that.*

And so, Axel stepped onto the floor—Floor 11 of Castle Oblivion, Twilight Town—where Sora was waiting.

xxx

This was Twilight Town—or rather, the town in Sora's memories. However, it was absolutely no different from the town Axel knew. From the rows of shops and houses to tiny things such as the shade of the flagstones in the road, everything was the same.

*"It's... incredible, this castle."*

Admiring anew the power of the white rooms to change form according to memory, Axel walked through the forest leading to the haunted mansion.

*I can't see the Replica, but he's probably somewhere in this town.*

*I'm sure Sora and the others are there.*

Vexen's voice could be heard coming from the edge of the forest. Axel concealed himself in the shade of a tree, furtively studying the situation between Vexen and Sora. *It will probably be easier to dispose of Vexen after he's fought*

*Sora, whether he wins or loses.*

“Sora, I’ll ask but one question. That ‘familiarity’, or your memories of Naminé—which one is real to you?”

“Naminé, of course! This feels familiar, but... it’s just an illusion you set up, of course!”

*I wonder what that means. Sora feeling that this world is familiar, I mean.*

*What the hell is happening to the connection between Roxas and Sora’s memories?*

*Were the two always connected?*

“Heh heh heh... memories are cruel things. They don’t only fade and get forgotten, they warp and bind people’s hearts.” Vexen still had leeway, standing before Sora, who gripped his Keyblade. “I’m sure I said it. That, this world was made of your other memories. Memories of this place exist on the other side of your heart. Your heart knows this place.”

*Vexen must know something—about memories, and Sora, and Roxas—and how this relates to the heart.*

“Liar! Memories like that don’t exist!” Sora waved his Keyblade.

“Bound by the chains known as memories and not believing your own heart is the same as throwing your heart away. If so, Sora, you’re no longer a Hero; just a doll, manipulated by memories. Yes... just like my Riku. No value in your existence in this world.”

*In other words, Riku—that Replica—is just a doll being manipulated by memories.*

“Your Riku...? No value...?” A displeased wrinkle formed between his brows. “Don’t mess around! You mean you’re saying you changed Riku!”

“Ho. Changed?” Vexen’s loud laughter echoed.

“What’s so funny!”

“That’s right—perhaps it could also be phrased that way, that I changed him. But—the familiar feeling you get from this world is real. Are you not able to



believe your own feelings of familiarity?” intoned Vexen, dispassionately, contrasting with Sora’s angry voice.

*He’s saying too many extra little things,* thought Axel, holding his breath for the right timing.

“Everything you say is a lie!” Sora lifted the Keyblade up over his head, and attacked with force. But, Vexen sent him flying with his shield.

“You are no longer—a hero. You’re just a doll, who has thrown away your hero heart.”

“I haven’t thrown away my heart! I’ll defeat you, and help Riku and Naminé! That’s... my heart!”

*What on earth is a heart—*

“You fool—get lost!” Vexen shot lumps of ice.

“Fira!”

However, the ice was melted by Donald’s magic.

“You’ll be in trouble if you forget about us!” Donald shouted.

*If you think of it as three against one, Vexen’s at a disadvantage. If he is defeated by Sora, my own troubles will decrease.*

At that moment, a shadow jumped out just in front of Axel.

It was the Replica.

Sora and Vexen still hadn’t noticed that the Replica was there. And, it didn’t seem like the Replica noticed Axel, standing in the shade of a tree.

“What, you here too—Riku,” called Axel, and the Replica turned.

“What the hell is happening,” he returned. “Besides, you said I’d get stronger if I came here—”

“Did I say that?” smiled Axel, meaningfully, and he folded his arms.

“Did you trick me?”

“No—let’s watch and see, Riku.” Axel pointed at Sora, who was fighting. While speaking with the Replica, Sora had dealt Vexen sound damage.

“That guy’s strong, isn’t he.” Not reacting to Axel’s words of admiration, the Replica watched Sora silently.

Sora’s Keyblade sliced through the air, beating down on Vexen.

“Ugh—for you to have this much power, even though you are bound by memories... you’re definitely dangerous!” panted Vexen, curling in on himself.

“Whatever! Put Riku back the way he was!” Sora jabbed the Keyblade into Vexen’s throat.

“The way he was? Fool... you don’t understand a thing. There’s nothing for that Riku but to fall into the nothingness of darkness. Same for you, Sora! If you go on being charmed by Naminé, you will be bound by memories, lose your heart, and finally become Marluxia’s tool!”

“Marluxia?! Does that person have something to do with Naminé—”

*To let the Replica hear that plan, and to let Sora hear that plan...*

“Haha, wasn’t counting on that,” Axel laughed, and put his hand on the Replica’s shoulder.

“What do you mean?” asked the Replica, and Axel grinned, yanking on his shoulder. The Replica, pulled backwards so hard that he almost fell on his ass, was instead propelled into a dark corridor leading to Castle Oblivion.

*The Replica was in the way. When inside the castle, I can even make others move through the space, like that.*

And so, Axel appeared in front of Sora. He threw a chakram at Vexen right then. It wasn’t that powerful, but it could kill in one hit if it got a vital point.

“Gah?!”

Vexen fell to the ground.

“Hey, Sora. Did I come at a bad time? My bad.” Axel turned his back on Sora, looked down at Vexen, and stabbed him in the back with the chakrams again.

“Guuuh... Axel... what are you...”

“You prattle on for ages, so I’ll wrap it for you. Your existence, that is.”

Vexen grovelled on the ground, looking up at Axel. “Hey... wait, please...”

“We are ‘nobodies’, who barely exist. But right here, your memories and existence end. Aren’t you happy?” Flames lit up in Axel’s hand.

*It’s after his fight with Sora. Vexen has barely any strength remaining.*

*Destroying him is easy.*

“S... stop... I don’t want to vanish...”

“Later, senior.”

Vexen’s body was wrapped in the flames Axel had fired.

“Gwaaaaaah!”

Vexen burned for a moment, then disappeared.

*So when a Nobody is destroyed, nothing remains...*

“What’s with you... what are you?!” Sora yelled.

“Well now. I don’t really know myself,” replied Axel, and disappeared.

xxx

*No turning back now...*

“Good job, Axel. It’s a great load off my mind, having that annoying guy destroyed.” Axel had returned to the room, and met Larxene. Ignoring her, Axel walked towards Marluxia.

“Marluxia... did you throw Vexen at Sora to test his power?”

Marluxia remained silent.

“Not just Sora, but you too,” said Larxene, cheekily, snuggling against Axel. “We were testing whether you were prepared to dispose of your fellow Organisation comrades. Well, you passed. You can join us. With the three of us together, taking over the Organisation will be a breeze.”

*Jeez—they’re underestimating the Organisation, and me.*

Axel shrugged. “And for that, Sora...”

“Yep. He wants to meet Naminé, so let’s let him.” At Larxene’s words, Marluxia finally smirked, and walked slowly over to a corner of the room. Naminé, who had been listening to the three speak, gripping her sketchbook, looked up.

“Be happy, Naminé. The time when you will meet the Hero you’ve waited for is near.”

“I’m... happy,” Naminé answered, in a faint voice.

“I’ll say it now: don’t do anything cruel like disappoint Sora’s feelings, you know,” said Larxene, happily, finally separating from Axel.

“...I understand.”

“You may bring up the thought from layered memories,” Marluxia told Naminé, glancing at Larxene.

And then, Marluxia and Larxene—disappeared.

“Naminé...” Axel called, in a quiet voice, but Naminé didn’t move.

xxx

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# Chapter 5: Chain of Memories

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**Translations:** Goldpanner

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xxx

*It's been 26 days since I joined the Organisation.*

Roxas woke up, like always, and headed for the lobby, like always.

But, unlike always, the atmosphere in the lobby was different.

“So you don’t understand the situation?” Xaldin folded his arms, his normally stern expression now even more severe.

“I only just heard too. What the heck is happening? It’d suck if it was true.” Demyx’s expression also looked darker than usual.

*I’m getting... a really bad feeling about this.*

“Did something happen?” Roxas asked Xigbar, who was standing next to Saïx.

“Hm? Yeah—one of the members who went to Castle Oblivion got annihilated, as they say.”

“Annihilated...?”

It was an unfamiliar word.

*I know the meaning of the word. To disappear and go away.*

*But, what does that mean—?*

*I’m sure Axel went to Castle Oblivion.*

*Axel, annihilated...?*

“Roxas, you have a mission. You’re going with Xigbar to a new world—Agrabah.”

At the sudden order, Roxas looked up in surprise. The mission had been issued by—Saïx, of course. Saïx’s atmosphere was no different to always.

“...they were saying something happened at Castle Oblivion, but...” Roxas asked, head down.

“It’s got nothing to do with you,” stated Saïx, coldly.

“...what about Axel?” Roxas pressed, plucking up the courage, but all Saïx did was narrow his eyes a little. However, Roxas didn’t notice.

“...well... maybe he was annihilated.”

“...uh...”

His words dried up.

*That’s—*

“From today, you will also be using the shop. You can purchase goods from that moogle over there with the munny you get during missions.”

“...”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Uh... yeah...”

Looking in the direction Saïx was pointing, a creature wearing the same coat as the Organisation—a moogle—was floating with a ‘flap –flap’.

“Once you’ve arranged your equipment from the shop, hurry and leave.”

“...Understood.”

Roxas went to speak to the moogle. “Thanks for coming, kupo. What do they call you, kupo?”

“Roxas... and you?” he answered, looking at the moogle. *A big red nose in a white face—is this moogle a Nobody, too?*

Upon hearing Roxas’ question the moogle paused for a moment, and then answered, “there’s no meaning in such a thing, kupo.”

“Huh...?”

“You here to shop, kupo? Take your time, kupo.”

“Ah, yeah...”

At the moogles' shop, there were various things that until now could only have been obtained by defeating heartless or from treasure chests.

Purchasing a few items, Roxas arranged them.

“Haven't forgotten anything, kupo?”

“Um.....”

*Even so, annihilation is...*

“Let's go, Roxas,” called Xigbar, who had been waiting the whole time for Roxas to finish his exchange with the moogles. “Hurry up.”

“...yeah...”

Roxas stepped into a dark corridor, as if being pushed in the back by Xigbar.

xxx

On the other side of the darkness was a town bathed in strong sunlight, and surrounded by desert—Agrabah.

*Today's mission is to investigate this new world.*

“This world is sweltering.” Xigbar surveyed the area, then turned back to Roxas, coming after him. “Let's finish investigating quick, and RTC.”

Even when pressed, Roxas was kind of zoned out.

“What's up? Is this new world really that much of a novelty?”

“They said that someone who went to Castle Oblivion was annihilated...” mumbled Roxas, shaking his head.

“Haha—that's the thing that's got you like this?”

Looking down, Roxas scuffed his foot. The dry earth skittered. “Thing...?”

“Let's get going.”

“...Was everyone annihilated?” said Roxas, head still down, and Xigbar shrugged exaggeratedly.

“Weeeell.... We'll know the details when we've RTC'd, as they say. Let's go,

kiddo.”

At those words, Roxas finally got moving, and began the investigation.

xxx

The city of Agrabah seemed to have been disturbed by a sandstorm, and the town was right in the middle of repair work, under their ruler.

When the investigation had come to a conclusion, and Roxas looked up at Xigbar. “...What do we do now? Do we check out the inside of the palace, too?”

“Nah, we’ve done enough for today. We managed to identify the ruler, so.” Xigbar answered, casting a glance at Roxas. He still looked depressed, as always.

“Well then, can we go back to the castle now?”

“Heh heh heh... you just wanna hurry up and go home, don’t you. That’s fine—let’s RTC.” Xigbar started walking, and Roxas followed after him.

A Heartless sprang at Xigbar’s back. But, Xigbar spun around, and fired his weapons, the Arrowguns. In one hit, the Heartless faded away into the air.

“All right. Now let’s return for real, kiddo.”

However, Roxas was staring at the place where the Heartless has disappeared.

Xigbar shrugged, as if to say, ‘well?’ “Didn’t you wanna hurry up and go back?”

“...Hey, what happens to Heartless after they disappear?”

“They leave a heart. And it is gathered into the great Kingdom Hearts, as they say,” answered Xigbar, looking right at Roxas.

“Well, what about Nobodies, then? We don’t have hearts...”

“Nothing is left behind. Cause we don’t really exist in the first place, you know.”

“And the member who got annihilated at Castle Oblivion?”

“Nothing’s left.”

Roxas looked down.

“If they disappear, does that mean we won’t see them again?”



“Yep.”

Roxas clenched his fists.

*Maybe I can't see Axel again...*

“Let's go back.”

“Huh? Yeah...”

And just as he went to go with Xigbar—

*The world is swaying.*

*I can't hear a thing.*

*The ground is rushing up.*

—His consciousness was engulfed by darkness.

xxx

Who are you?

xxx

He could hear a girl's voice coming from somewhere.

*Are you.... Xion...? Or....*

Roxas blacked out.

xxx

In a corner of a room with a crystal ball, Naminé sat in a chair, looking down. In her hands was a large sketchbook—and, a blue ocean and a little island had been drawn on the uppermost page.

She was rewriting Sora's memories into something more 'favourable'.

The memories relating to Kairi had vanished, and the fragments of memories were starting to scatter. And so, memories of Naminé were planted in order to fill the space where Kairi had disappeared.

“Naminé,” Axel called. Axel and Naminé were the only ones in the room.

“You're all he has, now.”

Naminé didn't stir.

The crystal ball in the centre of the room was showing Sora, alone on that island.

“You’re the only one who can save him.”

Naminé looked up.

“Shall I say it one more time? You’re the only one who can save him.”

“But... it’s too late.” Naminé hung her head once more.

But, Axel didn’t think so. *Here and now, it’s necessary—to liberate Naminé from under Marluxia’s control. And then, Marluxia will lose his power over the castle in one go. It isn’t necessary for ‘traitors’ to have any extra power.*

“It’s too early to decide that... Hey, Naminé. Have you noticed? Marluxia isn’t here right now.”

“What do you...”

“I mean, there’s no one here to stop you.”

Naminé got to her feet at last.

“Don’t screw it up.”

Naminé gave a slight nod, and rushed out of the room.

*Naminé’s probably heading for—Sora. That island, Destiny Islands.*

All alone in the room, Axel smiled.

“It finally got interesting. She’s fighting against her own nature.”

Axel stepped up to the crystal ball, and looked at Sora, displayed there.

*Maybe—Sora’s annihilation would lead to Roxas’. I want to avoid that, if I can. I wasn’t ordered to destroy Sora in the first place. There’s no way of knowing what the other members of the Organisation have been told, though.*

“Well then... Sora, Naminé, Riku, Marluxia, Larxene! This clash better be one hell of a show; I wanna enjoy this, okay?”

No one was there to hear him.

xxx

On top of his bed, Roxas was breathing peacefully as he slept. Two shadows

entered the empty room. One was Xemnas—and one was Saïx.

“It definitely appears to be Naminé’s influence,” Saïx reported, staring at Roxas’ sleeping face. Xemnas was doing the same thing beside him.

*What on earth is happening in Castle Oblivion...? Apart from that concerning the annihilation, no contact has been made. It’s possible that the information is being cut off deliberately. All I can do is trust in Axel’s actions.*

“Can he awaken?”

“I have received information that if all the Hero’s memories are peeled away, Roxas will come back to us,” Saïx answered.

“So everything depends on Castle Oblivion,” Xemnas said, as if to himself, and looked at Roxas again.

“Xion has become able to use the Keyblade as planned, and so for now, we can make Xion perform heart collection,” Saïx informed, in a detached manner.

*If Xion can use the Keyblade, it doesn’t matter if Roxas sleeps.*

Silence flowed between them.

When, by and by, Saïx went to leave the room, Xemnas opened his mouth again. “And, how fares the search for the room?”

*That’s an important question relating to the very existence of Castle Oblivion. However, as always, we haven’t been able to find the room.*

“Apparently, things aren’t progressing over there in the manner we thought they would,” answered Saïx, and walked at a leisurely pace out of Roxas’ room.

And so, Xemnas was the only one left there.

He gazed at Roxas’ sleeping face.

“So you’re still asleep...”

There was no one there to hear Xemnas’ murmured words but the sleeping Roxas.

xxx

*I’ve slipped inside Sora’s memories—into Destiny Islands. This created world*

*should have a 'me' made from memories in it somewhere, too.*

Naminé ran along the stormy beach.

She could see Sora, fighting a huge Heartless.

Naminé hurried towards a small island.

"Naminé..." called Sora, who had defeated the Heartless, and the illusion Naminé turned around.

An illusion—a fake Naminé being projected by the real one.

"Sora... you came for me."

The storm raging around the island died down.

"I finally... finally get to meet you..." said Sora, unbearably happy. But, the illusion shook her head slightly. "I, I wanted to meet you, I fought my way here."

"Yeah... me too..."

*I wanted to meet you, too.*

Naminé smiled, sadly.

Naminé's power—moved.

"But I, I made a mistake. I wanted to meet you, but, it was a mistake like this." Naminé turned her back on Sora, and looked out at the ocean.

The ocean, which had been storming until just now, was hideously quiet, and not even the sound of waves could be heard.

Nothing could be heard.

xxx

*Waking up was just like always.*

*On top of my bed, in my own room.*

*But I feel even hazier than I usually do.*

Xion got out of bed, and looked in the mirror in the middle of the room.

*It's the same me as always in there.*

Getting ready, she went to the lobby, to find Saïx and Xigbar standing there.

*I don't see Roxas.*

"...Where's Roxas?" she asked Saïx.

"It's got nothing to do with you."

*I thought he'd say that.*

*Saïx never answers my questions for me.*

Then, Xigbar poked his face in.

"As cold to Poppet as always, aren't you—Saïx." Saïx ignored him.

*Xigbar is always coming to talk to me. He talks to me a lot more than Saïx, so I like him.*

"Roxas fainted and now he's sleeping it off, as they say—"

"Huh?"

Surprised, her words wouldn't come out.

*Roxas fainted...?*

"You worried?" Xion nodded at Xigbar. "Heh heh, you're so cute, Poppet. I can take you to see him after."

"Okay..."

Xigbar patted Xion on the head.

*Even so, I wonder why Xigbar calls me Poppet.*

"You can't just do as you—well, I don't mind if you go see him, but complete your mission first."

*Saïx didn't stop me, which is rare.*

"What should we do today?"

"The same as yesterday, investigation. But, in a different world," answered Saïx, and told them the place.

"...Got it," Xion nodded, and stepped into the darkness that opened up beside her.

The sea and sky were both jet black.

The world—Destiny Islands—was covered by darkness.

This darkness was straight out of Sora's memory of the last time he had seen the island.

"Look, weren't you the one who gave this to me!" Sora yelled at Naminé, pulling out the keepsake made of paopu fruit.

*That's a fake keepsake made for the sake of fake memories.*

"That's right. I gave that to you." Naminé smiled gently, while looking out at the ocean.

But this was the illusion Naminé.

"No, Sora! Don't believe me!"

One more Naminé, this time the real one, appeared at last beside Sora.

*Yes—this is a vague world from inside his memories. It can be changed in any way.*

The other Naminé faded away.

"Hey, Sora. Think back, one more time. Your most important person. That faintly shining fragment of memory that slipped into the deepest part of your chest; try calling it with your heart. No matter how far away that light is, your heart's voice will surely reach."

At Naminé's pleading voice, Sora stared long and hard at the keepsake in the palm of his hand.

"My important person?" He kept staring at the keepsake. "That's easy. It's Na—" Sora went to say, and that instant, the keepsake glittered. Then, the yellow star-shaped keepsake made from Paopu fruit changed into something made of five sea shells joined together.

"Sora!" someone called, and—the world, Destiny Islands, was wrapped in light.

"Just now..."

Sora looked around.

The ocean was blue, as always, and the sky was serene.

And, no one was on the beach.

All that could be heard was the sound of waves.

“Just now... who was that? I can’t remember her, but... she felt so familiar...”

Sora started walking along the sand.

xxx

Xion walked alone along the beach. There was a little island, surrounded by a very pretty blue ocean.

*That’s right—this world is called Destiny Islands.*

The sand crunched under her feet as she walked. And, the sound of waves could be heard, constantly.

“...What a pretty place,” Xion murmured, and looked down at her feet. There was a shell there. She gently picked it up, and put it in her pocket.

Voices could be heard from afar, and Xion separated herself from the shoreline, rushing to hide in the shadow of a rock.

It was a basic rule of the Organisation that they must not be discovered by the inhabitants of the worlds.

“Hurry up~!”

A lone boy charged along the beach.

“Waaait, Tidus!”

“I don’t wait just cause I’m told to!”

Behind him, a girl whose outwards-curling hair waved in the wind and one more slightly older-looking boy followed after.

The boy called Tidus came to a sudden halt.

“Ooow~! Don’t just stop all of a sudden!”

“Over there...”

Over where the boy was pointing, at the tip of the small island, someone was

sitting. It was a girl with red hair.

“Kairi’s pretty blue...” said the girl, worriedly.

“She’ll cheer up soon,” replied the older boy, brightly.

Xion, so as not to be noticed, followed them quietly.

xxx

Castle Oblivion—Floor 12.

Sora, who had returned from Destiny Islands, was fighting the Replica.

The Replica swung his blade up over Sora.

“Riku, no!” Naminé shouted.

Ignoring Naminé, the Replica hit Sora. “Vanish, you fake!”

“Stop it!” Naminé yelled, and that instant, everything was wrapped in a blinding light.

“—ah...”

The Replica swayed dizzily, and fell to the floor.

“Riku!” Sora ran to the Replica, and helped him up. But, the Replica’s eyes were still open, unseeing.

“Did you do this, Naminé? What did you do to Riku!” Sora said, angrily, but all Naminé did was shake her head slightly.

*But—there wasn’t any other way.*

“In short, she broke his heart,” broke in the cruel voice of a woman, and Sora and Naminé turned around.

Larxene was standing there.

“So—so, what’s happened to Riku!” Sora asked Larxene, gently laying the Replica down on the floor.

*Sora still believes undoubtingly that the Replica is his best friend, Riku.*

“Ahaha! Your panicking is so funny~! If it’s Riku you’re after, there’s nothing for you to worry about. He wasn’t here from the start, you know.”



“What do you mean?” Sora gripped the Keyblade, and Larxene giggled.

“You want me to give it away? You want me to? What to do~”

“Don’t mess around!” Unable to take it any longer, Sora raised his Keyblade threateningly.

“Okay, I’ll give it away. Since you’ll be in so much more pain once you know the truth, I’ll tell you.” Larxene took one step towards Sora, and looked him in the face. “That thing lying over there is nothing but a toy that Vexen cooked up... a doll. Hey, it’s enough to make you laugh, isn’t it? He called you a fake, but he was much faker.”

“This Riku is a fake!?”

“Body, heart and memories; all fake. He was created, so it’s not like he’d have a past or anything. And so, its memories of being with Naminé were all planted. In other words, his passionate protection of her was born from nothing but lies.”

Larxene grinned and turned to Naminé.

xxx

Roxas was sleeping on his bed.

Xion quietly put the shell she had collected by his pillow.

“Roxas... today I went to the beach.”

There was still only one shell next to his pillow.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

Xion left Roxas’ room.

xxx

Larxene had been defeated and annihilated by Sora. And then Sora had headed for the 13<sup>th</sup> floor, in order to defeat Marluxia. Naminé sat beside the Replica, who lay on the floor, and gently stroked his hair.

*Poor doll had his memories rewritten so many times, used by the Organisation.*

“Naminé.”

Naminé looked up in surprise, and turned her eyes towards where the voice had come from.

“...Marluxia...”

Standing there was the King of the castle—Marluxia.

“Come, Naminé.” He grabbed Naminé’s arm and hoisted her to her feet.

“But... the Replica...”

“That doll doesn’t matter,” said Marluxia, giving the fallen Replica a cold glance, and then, pulling on Naminé’s arm forcefully, he started walking.

xxx

And so, Naminé was taken to—floor 12.

“How are you? Marluxia.”

There, in front of Naminé and Marluxia, Axel had appeared.

“How dare you show yourself in front of me, traitor!” Marluxia let go of Naminé’s arm, and glared at Axel.

“Traitor? Whatever do you mean?” replied Axel, calmly.

“Why did you let Naminé go! Without *your* meddling, the Keyblade Hero would have become our servant!” Marluxia’s body trembled with rage.

*The rage of a heartless Nobody.*

*I’ve been angry, before. I’ve laughed. I’ve cried. By tracing those memories, I repeat those actions, in response to the situation.*

“Oh yeah, your plan. Replace Sora’s memories one by one using Naminé’s power, until he’s wrapped around her little finger. And then, manipulating Sora through Naminé, take over the Organisation with Larxene. No? Cause that would make you the traitor, Marluxia.”

“But you too, with Vexen!”

“Yeah, I destroyed him. What of it? All I did was dispose of something useless to the Organisation. And I needed to make you guys trust me,” Axel grinned.

“So you were acting to find evidence on our conspiracy, right from the start...

is that it?” said Marluxia, resigning himself to it.

“Moving on—you gave that order before, didn’t you. To ‘dispose of the traitors’.” Axel spread his arms. Chakrams appeared in his hands. “So let me do so. Marluxia.”

“Humph—you should have obeyed me meekly,” Marluxia snorted.

“Larxene paid for her treason with annihilation. You will too. I’ll end your existence, in the name of the Organisation.”

“Just see if you can!” shouted Marluxia, pulling Naminé back by the arm.

“What are you trying to do? Are you thinking to use Naminé as a shield? That little girl doesn’t mean anything to me. I’ll just destroy her along with you. Get ready, Marluxia!” fired Axel, readying his chakrams.

*Peculiar or not, she’s got nothing to do with me, or the Organisation... I don’t think.*

*It’s fine to destroy things that are in the way.*

“Heh—really? Did you hear that, Sora!”

Sora had rushed into the room.

“Hm?”

Sora readied his Keyblade, and Axel lowered his arms.

“Axel is going to destroy Naminé along with me! So, defeat Axel!” Marluxia shouted.

“—Axel.”

*Well,* thought Axel.

*Facing Sora is like having Roxas right in front of me, and it doesn’t feel all that good. The memory of a feeling that didn’t come at all when I faced Marluxia, Larxene or Vexen.*

*Since I became a Nobody, I haven’t cared like this about anyone who isn’t connected to memories of my past.*

*Why? Why do I care about Roxas—and Sora—like this?*

*I don't expect to hesitate about annihilating someone, even if I'm interested in them.*

*Because, I'm a Nobody, without a heart.*

*But—I don't want to do it.*

“What's with you, Sora. Have you already turned into Marluxia's puppet?”

“No. As soon as I've defeated you, he's next!”

“Huh... hey, Sora.” Axel stared at Sora.

*I can't destroy Sora here. All I can do is lose on purpose. If I do that, I'd better lose as exaggeratedly as possible.*

“You and I have some slight destiny. I'd rather not fight you, but... it wouldn't be very cool of me to run away now, would it!”

Axel leapt.

xxx

Castle Oblivion—the basement.

In a gloomy room, Zexion folded his arms, lost in thought.

“First Vexen, and now even Lexeaus has been wiped out... what will become of the Organisation...”

Lexeaus had just been defeated by Riku.

Then, the air in the room wavered. “On top of that, Naminé turned traitor, and now Larxene's been destroyed by Sora. Wonder who's next,” Axel answered Zexion, who had meant to be speaking to himself, and showed himself.

Zexion frowned in displeasure. “...You, perhaps,” he said, without even turning around.

“Me? Nah.”

From the beginning, Zexion had never trusted Axel. *No, other than the born-and-bred members of the Organisation—other than those members whom I once spent time with in those research facilities, I don't trust anyone.*

*Even amongst ourselves, the man called Saix wormed his way deep in Lord*

*Xemnas's bosom without our noticing it. And I especially don't trust Axel, who is close to that Saix.*

"Just before, I pretended to lose to Sora and escaped. I'm not going to fight him again for a while. Marluxia's gonna be the next one to fall."

"Of course Sora can't lose to Marluxia, since he beat you. Is that what you mean?"

*Marluxia was given control over this castle, even though he's only Number 11. A low number doesn't mean low strength, but if you look from Number 8, Axel's point of view, he must be thinking that Marluxia is ranked below him. But in practice, Marluxia is stronger in battle than Axel. Axel looks down on him only because his number is later.*

"It means that Marluxia, who planned to use Sora to rebel against the Organisation, will be destroyed by Sora's hand."

"So then—there's no reason for us to have Riku in *our* hands anymore." Zexion finally looked at Axel.

The thin smile playing on Axel's lips was unpleasant. "Do you mean you'll dispose of him? You planning to take Riku on directly, when he defeated *Lexaeus*?"

"I do things differently," replied Zexion, and vanished.

"Well then—how do I take care of things from now, I wonder... and, my butt really hurts..."

Rubbing the place that had been hurt during his battle with Sora, Axel also vanished once more.

xxx

Sora, who had defeated Marluxia, and Naminé met smiling. The Replica watched them, emptily.

"Are you okay, Riku?"

The Replica's head popped up at the sound of Sora's worried voice. "I'm not Riku," he replied, slowly. "I'm a fake. I don't remember when, or where, or why I was born. All I have left is you and Naminé—but those memories are only lies,

too.” The Replica shook his head quietly.

“Hey Naminé, isn’t there a way to put Riku’s memories back to normal?” Goofy asked, but Naminé shook her head quietly.

“I don’t care. It’s okay.” He turned his back on Sora and the others, and began to walk away. *I don’t know where I should go. But, I want to go somewhere.*

“Wait!” The Replica stopped moving at Sora’s voice. “Whether you’re a fake or whatever, it doesn’t matter anymore! You’re here now, you’re not anyone else, and you have your very own heart. Your memories belong to you and you only, so treasure them!”

*My very own heart—*

*Does a created doll like me really have a heart, I wonder.*

“Sora, you’re so kind. Your feelings are so real, that even a fake like me can understand them—that’s enough for me.”

“Riku!” Sora yelled, with all his might, but the Replica didn’t answer, and broke into a run, as if trying to escape from that kindly place.

xxx

It was the tenth day since Roxas had gone to sleep.

Xion woke slowly, and had a good stretch.

Then she took off her coat, and put on a new one. She shoved the dirtied coat in the proper basket in a corner of her room, to find that a clean coat had appeared hanging in her closet without her noticing.

*The lower dusks clean my room for me.*

*I think they probably wash my clothes, and change my sheets too.*

Then she washed her face, and looked in the mirror.

*It’s the same me as always in the mirror.*

*I don’t change.*

*I’ll leave my room, and head for the lobby. Depending on when I go out, there are people I meet and people I don’t.*

*Today, there's no one here but Saix and Xigbar.*

*"Today, you have investigation with Xigbar."*

*"Got it."*

*Once I've received Saix's orders, Xigbar calls out to me right away, as if he was waiting for me.*

*"Let's go, Poppet."*

*Well, it's rare that I go out with others. This is the first time I'll go on a mission with someone other than Roxas. I mostly just go on my own.*

*I want to revisit the world they made me go to earlier—Destiny Islands. I can collect sea shells there. Though, even when I visit other worlds, I can collect shells on my way back.*

*The sunset that I watched from the edge of that island is a lot like the one I watch from the clock tower in Twilight Town; it's very pretty.*

*I don't really know why I decided to give Roxas sea shells. But I felt like it was something I had to do, so I collected them.*

*Because the shells become a keepsake. So that even if we're separated, we can meet again—*

*But, I wonder how I knew shells were keepsakes. Nobodies are beings that aren't allowed to exist—I don't really know much more than that.*

*I don't know, but I know about the worlds.*

*I don't remember a thing, but I know things. For example, the way to fight, and use magic. Of course, I have been taught many things. But, even though I was taught, I wonder why it felt like I already knew.*

*That's probably what a 'memory' is.*

*A memory—what on earth is a memory, anyway?*

*I feel like if Roxas was here, we could talk about it properly. There's no one else I could talk about that kind of stuff with.*

*"...How is Roxas?"*

“Still sleeping. He might not wake up.”

*At Saix’s reply, I stop knowing what to say.*

“You go to see how he is every day, don’t you? You’re so kind, Poppet.”

*I look up at Xigbar’s words; I didn’t realise it could be seen like that.*

“Well, you can go see him until you’re satisfied. Perhaps he’ll just wake up all of a sudden.”

*Those words give me an unpleasant feeling, too. So far, Saix hasn’t even once acknowledged my actions.*

“Let’s hurry up and go.”

“...Yeah.”

Xion stepped into the darkness that Xigbar opened.

On the other side of that darkness was blue ocean.

xxx

Riku stood on the beach. This was inside the castle—not the real Destiny Islands.

*A world made from my memories—the childhood home I threw away.*

Riku crossed the beach, and sprinted to the same old pier.

Kairi was standing there.

“Hey, Kairi—you—”

The moment Riku called out, Kairi vanished, turning into Zexion.

“You really should have known that it would turn out like this,” Zexion began to intone quietly. “Before arriving here, you travelled through many worlds made from your memories. But, you should have met nothing but beings of darkness. In your heart, nothing remains but dark memories. The memories of your childhood home—have vanished.”

“Liar!” Riku shouted. “I remember everyone from the islands! Tidus, and Selphie, and Wakka! Kairi! Sora! Everyone—my... my... important friends...” He clenched his fists, looking down.



“And who was the one who threw those friends away? Have you forgotten your own actions? You shattered your own childhood home!” Zexion criticised, and the surroundings were wrapped in darkness, thunder crashing. Rain began to pelt down, soaking Riku.

xxx

“Riku’s gone, isn’t he...” said Goofy, when Sora had returned to Naminé, not having been able to chase down the Replica.

“...Yeah,” said Sora, giving a small, lonely nod, and he looked at Naminé.

“...Can you bring back our memories?” Donald asked her.

“Yes... just because you can’t remember, it doesn’t mean the memories have disappeared.”

“What do you mean?” Goofy shrugged.

“Once you remember one thing about your past, the other memories will come back with it, and finally you’ll remember many things, right? Memories are connected. Many fragments of memory are joined together in a chain, and they bind people’s hearts. My power is not to destroy memories, but to take apart the links in the chain, and reconnect them, so—no one’s memories have been destroyed.”

Jiminy popped out of Sora’s pocket with a ‘pyon.’ “Then you can bring them back, can’t you.”

“But to do that, I have to take apart the links I reconnected. And then I have to gather the fragments of memory scattered deep in your hearts, and put the chain of memories back the way it was. I think it’ll take a long time. But, it’ll probably go well.”

Naminé looked down for a moment—and then she showed them her smile.

xxx

When Axel tempted, “Hey, wouldn’t you like to become the real thing?” the Replica gave a clear nod.

*I don’t know whether the Replica project that Vexen designed was a success or a failure. But, I think this Replica still has some use left in him. He copies*

*power according to memories.*

*If so, then if he could also copy other people's memories, there's no reason why he couldn't get new power. I think he can copy human's—no, even Nobodies skills.*

*Because special Nobodies—the members of the Organisation—are controlled by the memories of our time as humans.*

"It's about time he'll be coming back, I think?" said Axel, but the Replica didn't show any reaction. "Hey, do you know how it is you take other people's powers?"

"...I defeat them, and eat up their power, or so Vexen told me."

"Eat up... hm..."

*I don't understand what kind of action that entails, thought Axel, and then the air in the room quivered.*

*Just as I thought—it's Zexion, who's been battered by Riku.*

Zexion collapsed, and beat the ground with his fists. "What... what is with that guy! Until now, no one has ever taken in that much darkness! It shouldn't be po..."

*This is the first time I've ever seen Zexion this shaken. But this'll probably be the last time, anyway.*

Zexion finally noticed the Replica in front of him.

"Wha—Riku!?" Zexion, still on his knees, shrank back as if in fright.

"Hey, senior." Axel poked his face out from behind the Replica.

"O-oh. That's the Replica that Vexen made, isn't it. I see, perhaps he can defeat Riku if they face each other... Axel?" said Zexion, sounding clingy, and the Replica looked down at him.

"Hey, Riku—you know all too well how fake you are, don't you. Do you wanna be the real thing?"

"Yeah." The Replica nodded quietly.

"Well then, it's simple. You should get yourself some power that the real Riku

doesn't have. If you do that, you can be something real—not Riku, not a fake of anything, but a new existence,” Axel persuaded, smiling.

“Axel! What are you saying!” Zexion shrank back even further. Still sitting.

“Look, there's some perfect ‘feed’ right over there,” said Axel, nodding his chin towards Zexion.

“What kind of idiotic thing are you...”

“My bad, Zexion. Watching over Sora and Riku looks a lot more fun than helping you.”

“Stay... stay back!” appealed Zexion, moving back even more, and the Replica brought his blade down on him.

*In order for Sora—no, for Roxas to live, and also for us to accomplish our own goal, Zexion is in the way. And, if it's for the sake of our own goal, we already decided what to do, that time.*

*Not only Zexion. Marluxia, and even this Replica here are nothing but pawns. The day will probably come when I have to choose between our own goal, and this inexplicable thing I have for Roxas now.*

“Stop—!”

Zexion's scream disappeared, swallowed by darkness.

xxx

Castle Oblivion—13<sup>th</sup> floor.

Sora, Donald and Goofy were each climbing into their own flower bud-shaped pods.

The pods were not devices for restoring their memories. They were only devices for sleep. However, if they didn't sleep, their memories couldn't be joined back together.

“We started out on lies, but I'm really glad that I could meet you,” said Naminé, and Sora turned, slowly. He smiled.

“Yeah, me too. When I got to meet you, and when I remembered your name, I was really happy. The way I felt at those times wasn't a lie,” Sora said.

*Even though they're feelings made from false memories, they became real feelings. But, of course, memories that were built must be destroyed.*

*I must disappear from Sora's memories.*

Naminé smiled, and said, "Goodbye."

*Goodbye—you won't remember me anymore.*

"It's not goodbye! When I wake up, we'll meet again. And so next time, we can be not false, but real proper friends. Let's promise, Naminé."

Naminé shook her head. "You'll forget that promise, too."

*That's what it means to rewrite memories.*

"Even if the chains of memories come undone, the fragments of memory don't disappear. The memory of that promise will definitely stay somewhere in my heart. That's what I think."

*I want to believe Sora's words—that's what I think.*

*Sora definitely wouldn't forget me. I feel like I can believe that.*

*My chest hurts.*

"...So, will we promise?"

"Yeah, it's a promise." Sora put out his little finger. Naminé entwined it with her own. "I promise, Sora."

"I promise."

And then, Sora casually went into the pod.

*A promise—even if the memory is gone, the promise will remain. That's definitely true.*

*It can't be forgotten.*

"Hey, Sora," she called. He was already in the pod. "The fragments of your memory are sinking into the darkness in your heart, and one by one, they become unfindable. But Sora, there's someone irreplaceable that you made an important promise to." The pod door started to close. "That's your light—the light in the darkness. If you remember that person, all the memories that sank

into darkness will come back,” she told Sora, who was dozing off, and she smiled.

“Look, that keepsake. I changed its shape with my power, but—if you remember that person, it will go back to how it used to be, you see?”

*Sora’s probably already dreaming—*

But Naminé kept talking.

“See, your memories have come back. It’s okay. You’ll forget me, but—we have a promise, so you’ll come back. That promise will be the light that connects us, someday. So even if you forget me now, there’s no way it will disappear. Because the memories won’t disappear—”

And then Sora was sleeping—and he woke up.

xxx

By the sea, Xion picked up a small shell.

“There’s no one here today, either...”

On the beach with no one on it—Destiny Islands—nothing but the sound of waves could be heard.

The setting sun painted the sea red.

Just at this moment, Xion looked at the tip of the small island, where the girl had sat.

“...Maybe she cheered up...”

Xion didn’t know that the girl wouldn’t be coming to the island again.

xxx

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# Chapter 6: Reunion

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**Translations:** Goldpanner

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xxx

*The same old white ceiling. My same old room.*

*But, something's changed. I don't get what, though.*

*This is my room. I'm a member of the Organisation. No. XIII... Roxas.*

*But, something's different.*

Roxas sat up in the hard bed, and slowly shook his head.

He felt incredibly fuzzy.

*How did I fall asleep yesterday? I don't remember... I don't get it.*

Going to get out of bed, Roxas noticed seashells, left by his pillow.

*What the hell is that. I don't really get it.*

*I don't get anything.*

Roxas left his room and started walking, feeling like his body was remembering to go to the lobby on its own.

*That's right, I gotta go there and do a mission. But, I'm so confused.*

He walked down the corridor and into the lobby, but no one was there.

"...Axel...?" Roxas muttered unconsciously. The name of his friend. He touched his mouth.

*They said that Axel might have been annihilated. I remember that.*

*Annihilation means turning into nothing. Xigbar told me that.*

*That world... that world painted with the sorrowful sunset. Where was that again?*

*I can't remember. I don't really get it. What happened to me?*

On the other side of the glass that served as the walls of the lobby, it was neon and darkness, just like always. In this world, you never really knew whether it was morning or night.

Roxas opened a dark corridor beside himself, and headed for that world.

*If I go to that world... Maybe Axel, or Xion, will be there.*

xxx

Sitting on top of the clock tower, Roxas watched the clock tower detachedly.

No one was there.

*No one...*

A train was running far away. Even further beyond that, the setting sun was sinking.

"Roxas...?"

Roxas turned at the sound. "Xion..." Standing there was the raven-haired girl. "What happened to me?"

"You slept for ages."

"Ages...?" Roxas narrowed his eyes at Xion's answer.

*Ages... so, it didn't happen yesterday.*

"Saïx was saying we didn't know when you'd wake up," said Xion, sitting down beside Roxas.

"But, it's great that you did wake up." Xion smiled happily, tilting her head and looking at Roxas.

"Well, I still feel like a zombie." Roxas shook his head slowly, and Xion shouted in laughter, causing Roxas to laugh too.

Their giggling trailed off, and Xion slipped her hand into a coat pocket, and took something out.

“Here you go.” It was a little shell.

*Those... were also left by my pillow.*

“Those shells... I collected them every time I went on a mission.”

The shell she left in the palm of his hand was light, dry, and kind of pointless.

*But, I wonder why... I’m getting some kind of weird sensation.*

“Try putting it to your ear,” said Xion.

From deep inside the shell, a sound could be heard... like the wind... the sound of waves.

*If you close your eyes, the sound of waves is all you can hear, thought Xion. I don’t know why, but I think, maybe... this is familiar. I wonder why the sound of waves makes me feel this way...*

*Did I dream this? Or is it something else?*

*I feel like I’ve listened to the sound of the waves and watched the sunset with someone else, just the two of us, before.*

*Yeah... just like listening to the sound of waves from this shell with Roxas, on top of the clock tower.*

xxx

And so, Roxas’ daily life resumed.

After that, he knew, thanks to Xion, that he’d been sleeping for twenty days.

*Yesterday was the fiftieth day since I joined the Organisation. So, today’s the 51<sup>st</sup>.*

*I wake up, go to the lobby. That’s fixed.*

Roxas stepped into the lobby to find Xigbar, Saïx and Demyx there.

Xion wasn’t there, probably already out on a mission.

*It’s good that I got to see her yesterday, thought Roxas, vaguely. That shell... the sound of waves.*

*First, I’ll restock my items at the shop.*



“Didn’t think I’d see you, heart you collapsed, kupo. Don’t push it too hard, kupo!” said the moogle, with a worried sort of face.

“I’m not really pushing it.”

“Really, kupo? I’ve got some new stock, kupo!”

During the exchange, Roxas bought some items. As he headed towards Saïx, Xigbar called out to him.

“So you’re finally up? While you were sleeping, all the guys at Castle Oblivion got annihilated, as they say.”

“Uh...”

Words wouldn’t come.

*All of them... no. All I’ve heard is that someone was annihilated.*

*What’s happened to Axel...*

“So you’ve finally woken up,” Saïx called, too, and Roxas looked up.

“Were the members that went to Castle Oblivion really all...”

“We are investigating,” stated Saïx, cutting him off.

“You don’t know anything?”

“Nothing I can tell you, at least. You’ll be taking your missions alone for the time being. The facts are, we’re short of hands.”

*If they’re investigating, does that mean there’s a possibility that they’re not all gone?*

“Hurry up and head off.”

From the missions that Saïx had prepared, Roxas chose to head to Agrabah, and set foot into the Darkness Between.

xxx

Today’s mission was something at a world she hadn’t been to before; Beast’s Castle.

The Darkness Between led to a place like a large entrance hall. The atmosphere in the gloomy castle was a little bit like that of the Organisation’s castle, Xion

thought.

Today's mission was to defeat Heartless shaped like dogs and collect hearts.

*When I've finished the mission, I'll buy ice cream, and go to the Twilight Town clock tower. I want to eat ice cream with Roxas.*

*When I'm with Roxas, I get this strange feeling. I thought so yesterday.*

*It feels like something about Roxas' atmosphere has changed slightly since he fell asleep.*

Climbing the stairs from the entrance, she found a huge door. It opened out into a wide, sunny room. It looked kind of like a dance hall.

And, right in the middle of the hall was the target Heartless.

"Okay... I'll hurry up and beat this thing."

*Now, Keyblade in hand...* thought Xion, and that instant, something felt wrong.

"...Huh?"

The Keyblade didn't come.

The Keyblade she'd come to expect to be able to use, ever since the day she'd fought alongside Roxas, wouldn't come.

Releasing an ominous breath, the Heartless charged at her.

Stepping aside in a flurry, Xion tried once again to imagine the Keyblade into her hand.

"Please... gyah!"

But, that moment, the Heartless sent her flying.

"Why...?"

*I'll lose like this...!*

Panicking, she chanted some magic. She didn't know any strong magic, but she thought she would be okay.

"Fire!"

A little ball of flame hit the Heartless, which luckily went up in flames.

*Right now, there's no way to defeat it except with magic.*

Xion fired an endless chain of magic.

xxx

*The mission could be finished by reporting to Saix.*

*But, I can't bring myself to face Roxas like this.*

Returning to the castle, Xion have her mission report.

*I must report how many Heartless I defeated, and also how many hearts I collected to make Kingdom Hearts complete.*

"Couldn't you obtain any hearts?"

"...I defeated it with magic at the last minute."

*It's okay not to report that I couldn't use the Keyblade... isn't it.*

"What do you think the Keyblade is?"

"What...? A key for gathering hearts..."

*Of course I know that the Keyblade is a special key. Without the Keyblade, hearts can't be collected.*

"That's right. Get that meaning into your head. If you people can't use your Keyblade, you wouldn't even be in a position to rank among the Organisation's lowest. Learn this well, and use your Keyblade to destroy the Heartless for certain."

"...Got it. I'll be careful from now on."

*I must have only been feeling unwell today... tomorrow, I'll be able to use the Keyblade like always, I know it.*

Xion left the lobby after him.

xxx

It felt to Roxas that every day was the same one, repeating over and over.

*I wonder why I think like that. The missions are different each day.*

Even if he went to the clock tower, no one would come. Not even Xion.

*I don't know what this feeling is called.*

*I don't think I'll ever see Axel again.*

There was a tightness deep in his throat, like it was being squeezed. Painful.

He asked Saïx about the members who went to Castle Oblivion almost every day, but he only ever replied that they were 'investigating'.

*At least, if I could see Xion... if we could talk to the clock tower, maybe something would change. But, for whatever reason, I haven't been able to meet her in the lobby in the morning, or on the clock tower after missions.*

*Maybe she went somewhere on a long mission, like Axel.*

*But... Saïx was in a bad mood after I asked him about Axel. I can't really ask him what happened to Xion on top of that.*

He went back to the clock tower every day, holding that faint hope, but no one showed up.

xxx

*I definitely can't use the Keyblade...*

Xion defeated the last Heartless with magic, and sat down where she was.

*If Saïx yells at me for not being able to get hearts, I don't have any more good excuses.*

*What should I do...*

xxx

Even deeper in than the Round Room was Xemnas' lab.

There were rooms that seemed like laboratories all over the castle, but only a restricted few members were allowed to go to this one.

Xemnas and Xigbar were there.

"I don't like it."

"What are you talking about."

Xigbar, sitting on a sofa at the side of the room, said "I'm talking about how all the guys who went to Castle Oblivion got annihilated by the Hero."

Xemnas, who was writing something, stilled his hand.

“Making the Hero dispose of Marluxia was fixed from the start. D’you give the order?”

“That is correct... what did you want to know?”

“Even so, having everyone annihilated just doesn’t fly, as they say. You can’t say the test project is turning out to be a winner, and half of us founding members getting annihilated has to have been unplanned, right, Xehanort?”

“...What an old name,” Xemnas said, mouth twisted, laughing at it.

At the name from once, when he had been a human, when he had been that person’s pupil... and, when he had fought with them.

“So, the annihilation wasn’t planned... those guys just got tangled in the net, as they say, didn’t they?” Xigbar looked at Xemnas.

“In any case, at least we have two Keyblades with us. Over here, the project is going well. Though our numbers have been halved, our plan hasn’t changed,” said Xemnas, simply. His eyes dropped to the papers by his hand, and his pen returned to running across the page.

Xigbar shrugged, and disappeared from the room.

xxx

Roxas woke up and headed for the lobby, like always.

Today was the 71<sup>st</sup> day since he had joined the Organisation. He hadn’t seen Axel or Xion for a long time.

Entering the lobby, Xigbar called out to him. “Heh heh... what a long face. Did something happen?”

“Not really...”

*Nothing happened. I couldn’t meet anyone, not even at the clock tower. It’s too difficult to answer him.*

“Well, the castle’s sure gotten quiet fast. I guess this ain’t a bad number of people after all, as they say.”

At that moment, someone barged into the lobby.

“What a racket...” muttered Xigbar. It was Demyx.

“Did you hear, Roxas?? It sounds like all the guys at Castle Oblivion really did get annihilated!”

Roxas hadn’t thought he’d hear that from Demyx all of a sudden.

“...Did Saïx tell you that?”

“Yeah! He said the Nobodies they sent to check it out reported it. Seems there wasn’t anyone in that castle at all. I am SO happy they didn’t make me go. It would totally suck to get annihilated, right...”

Demyx rattled on, talking fast. Roxas didn’t know what to say. He dropped his head, and Xigbar laughed.

“Wha... what’s with you, old man?”

“Us un-annihilated ones will have to work hard keep things ship-shape, as they say,” said Xigbar, peering into Demyx’s face.

Demyx shrugged. “Uh... yessir, I shall work very hard!”

“And you’ll do your best too, right, kiddo?”

“...Yeah...”

Even after replying, Roxas stayed standing there, paralysed with shock.

“When you’re ready, hurry up and go on your mission. Today you have Twilight Town,” called Saïx, entering the lobby. Roxas couldn’t even gather the will to ask him if everyone really did get annihilated.

*Every time I asked, Saïx would answer the same thing without fail. We’re investigating. Today, I wish he’d tell me that again.*

*But, I’m scared to ask.*

*I’ll never see Axel again.*

*I don’t know what to call this feeling.*

*I hate being here.*

Thinking that getting out of that place would be a million times better, Roxas started walking.

Tearing furiously around Twilight Town, Roxas destroyed Heartless. He didn't really understand why, but he had to do it.

*All of them gone... annihilated. I can't see him again.*

Thinking about it made him want to run.

*What the hell is this?*

Dashing into a back alley, Roxas swung his Keyblade down on the last Heartless.

A heart floated up from the vanquished Heartless and vanished.

Just then, Roxas could hear clapping coming from somewhere.

"Yo! Roxas. You haven't changed! Fight fight fiiight!"

Roxas turned, and standing there was... Axel.

"It's been a while, hasn't it?" Axel walked casually towards him. "What's the matter? You look kind of dazed there," grinned Axel, and he laughed, just like always.

*I don't know what to do.*

"...They said all the members who went to Castle Oblivion got annihilated..."

Axel stuck out his chest. "Well, I'm pretty tough."

*I feel weird, somehow.*

*But I know. Axel probably... isn't really as strong as he says.*

"...I was worried, okay."

"Worried? Nobodies like us don't have hearts to worry with, you know," said Axel, and Roxas was finally able to smile.

*I'm so glad it didn't turn out that I couldn't see him again.*

*So, of course, we have to... at the usual place...*

"I'll go buy the ice cream!"

Roxas dashed away.

*He must have meant for me to wait at the usual spot,* thought Axel, and he headed off first to the clock tower.

In the end, he had been the only one to come back from Castle Oblivion.

*I don't care about that in itself, but... I also lost track of Sora, Riku, Naminé and the other intruders.*

*There are too many rooms in that castle that I don't really understand.*

*And, I still couldn't find that room.*

"Axel!"

Axel turned at the sound of Roxas' voice. Roxas stood there panting hard, an ice cream in each hand, looking happy.

Axel squinted at him. Taking an ice cream with a smile, he looked anew for similarities between Roxas and Sora.

"This your treat?"

"Well, today is special," said Roxas, sitting down beside him.

*Roxas feels more and more like Sora when he smiles. Well, I didn't actually get to see Sora smile in that castle.*

*Anyway, we Nobodies were born when our Others became a Heartless. So, fundamentally, we Nobodies just can't know every single thing about our Others.*

There was only one person that Axel had known as an Other, and was still in touch with. It was even more unlikely, in fact impossible, for his Nobody and Other to meet at the same time.

Because, essentially, Nobodies and their Others—as in, the human who became a heartless—don't exist at the same time.

*But Roxas, right here, is a special Nobody. He doesn't only wield the Keyblade; he also exists at the same time as his Other. That's like, defying the rules of the universe. But, I've heard that the Keyblade reflects the will of the universe. Are the rules and the will different?*



He was staring unthinkingly at Roxas' profile.

Roxas noticed his gaze. "What. Is there something on my face?" he said, eating his ice cream.

"No... I have to go report to the boss man... I know he's gonna yell at me!" lied Axel, biting his own ice cream.

"So you haven't gone back to the castle yet?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah..." Axel nodded, gazing out at the sunset.

*I haven't been away that long... but it feels long enough.*

"Then why did you come here?"

*Because before going back to the castle, before seeing anyone else, I wanted to eat ice cream here with Roxas.*

*And also, I wanted to make sure that Roxas really was Sora's Nobody.*

*I don't know which was more conscious on my part.*

*But, I'm afraid to just confess the feelings I have right now.*

"I need to steel my heart for the scolding I'm about to get," Axel shrugged.

Roxas nudged his shoulder. "You don't have a heart, remember?" And then he laughed.

*This is a strange sensation.*

*This feeling... what is it now... that's right, the feeling that I've gone back to when I was a human.*

*Something's buzzing somewhere inside my body.*

"Hey, your ice cream's melting. Hurry up and eat it," said Axel, trying to hide it.

"Yeah." Roxas bit on his ice cream, too. Then he opened his mouth. "While you were away, I ate ice cream here with Xion."

"With Xion?"

*Xion... the 14<sup>th</sup>. Don't remember much about that one. Besides, I've never seen them with their hood down.*

“We promised to eat ice cream together, the three of us, once you were back.”

*Why do those words feel so horribly unexpected?*

“Xion... is my friend,” Roxas said, quietly.

xxx

Axel flopped down into his own bed, and stared at the ceiling.

“What happened to the report?”

Saïx had appeared there. Axel sat up, and looked at him.

“Not even a word of slight appreciation?”

“I’ve heard that Naminé’s whereabouts have become unclear,” said Saïx, not showing any sign that he had paid any attention to Axel’s teasing words.

“She disappeared. Wonder where she is now?”

The answer contained no lies.

*Well... I was the one who sweet-talked her into it. But I lost track of her after that.*

“Did you search every room?”

“Every? You know all too well that ‘every’ would have been impossible, right?”

*In Castle Oblivion, there’s a room that no one has ever set foot in.*

*That’s even the reason that castle exists.*

“Did you find that room?”

“If I did find it, I’d report it properly,” said Axel, and Saïx sighed exaggeratedly.

*Under a certain definition, Saïx is the one who pretends he has a heart most of all, but he doesn’t have one,* thought Axel.

To change the subject, Axel got up out of bed, and went over to Saïx.

“In any case... you were right about Marluxia being the traitor,” Axel whispered in his ear.

“Humph... all those in the way were rounded up and sent there, that’s all.”

*Saïx is probably telling the truth.*

*Those other members of the Organisation were in Saïx's way... no, in our way.*

*But, I wonder why I can't help being sarcastic about it.*

"Don't tell me I was one of those?" Axel asked, laughing, and the scars on Saïx's forehead moved slightly along with his expression. *Looks like he didn't appreciate that joke.*

"Well, you came back safely, so it doesn't matter."

Axel thought of asking whether Saïx had been worried about his safety, but couldn't be bothered putting him in a worse mood. *Maybe the memories he has of anger and displeasure are really strong.*

Axel shrugged, and reported one last thing.

"I took care of Zexion."

Saïx turned his face up, and stared at Axel. Facing that gaze, Axel kept talking.

"It's all going according to your plan... for now."

xxx

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# Chapter 7: Friends

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**Translations:** Goldpanner

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xxx

Axel was waiting there in the lobby.

"Today, as punishment, I have to go on your mission with you," laughed Axel, spreading his arms exaggeratedly.

"Punishment? Why is going on a mission with me punishment?"

"Well, cause it's like babysitting, I guess," Axel said, heaving a fake sigh.

"You're terrible!"

"Honestly. You'd think they could let me rest for one day at least, coming home tired like this...?" Roxas smiled at Axel's comical tone. "We'll go just as soon as you hurry up and get ready."

"Okay. Just wait a second. I'll go buy some things."

Roxas went and spoke to the Moogles.

"Ummm..."

"Glad to see you here, kupo... today you look happy or something, kupo."

Hearing the Moogles say such a thing made Roxas feel strange.

*Nobodies don't have hearts, but I look happy...?*

"Let's hurry, Roxas."

"I said okay." Roxas turned to Axel, behind him. "Don't you have to buy anything?"

"I'm a can-do man, so I got ready ages ago."

"How exactly are you 'can-do', kupo?" mumbled the Moogles.

"Yeah, how exactly are you 'can-do'?" Roxas repeated.

"In ways darling children like you don't understand," said Axel, scratching his head. Roxas and the Moogles looked at each other and laughed.

"...let's hurry up and go."

"Roger," Roxas answered, laughing.

*Today's mission was heart collection in Agrabah.*

*When he had killed a few Heartless, Axel stopped.*

*"Did something happen?" Axel lifted a finger to his lips. Roxas looked doubtful. "Hm?"*

*"That guy..."*

*Where Axel was pointing, a large creature that didn't seem like a Heartless—Pete—was hanging around, large body quivering.*

*"That guy... what's he doing in front of that wall?" whispered Roxas.*

*"Aha!" Pete hollered, almost at the same time.*

*"What?"*

*Pete pressed the wall and it moved slowly, opening up a path.*

*"Now, I can finally get there!" Pete disappeared over by the wall.*

*After waiting a moment, Axel and Roxas drew closer to the wall, and peered through to the other side.*

*It seemed to open up into the desert.*

*"Okay, let's follow him, and try not to get caught." Axel stepped through onto the other side of the wall.*

*"Huh? But today's mission is heart collection, right? We can't just change it however we—"*

*"If we find any shady characters, it's also an important mission to check them out," Axel half-lectured, hands on hips.*

*"It's not like violating orders?"*

*"You gotta play these things by ear... got it memorised? If we collect hearts after we chase this guy, then we won't be violating orders, will we?"*

*"...yeah, you're right."*

*Somehow, I think he gets it, but he doesn't seem to...*

*“Let’s go.”*

*Roxas chased after Axel in a flurry.*

*They went through the hole in the wall. Planted in the middle of the desert that opened up on the other side was a carved statue of a tiger, its mouth opened wide. Even from a distance, it was easy to see that its mouth was big enough to let people pass through. Pete entered it, looking about nervously.*

*Axel and Roxas followed after him, keeping an even distance.*

*"There just had to be a cave like this..."*

*The place the two had gone down into was a stone cavern that seemed to have been made by someone for some purpose, not naturally formed.*

*Pete could not be seen.*

*"I'm surprised how big this cave is... looks like we lost him," Axel shrugged.*

*"What'll we do?"*

*"Can't be helped... this is as far as we'll chase him. Let's switch back to doing heart collection."*

*I guess we don't have to investigate any further, thought Roxas. "So we don't have to look for him?" Roxas asked Axel, with a strange look on his face.*

*"Yeah... We didn't find out what his goal was in the end, but I reckon finding this cave is enough for today. Plus, searching this huge cave would be a pain in the ass."*

*"So... it's not an important mission to check out shady characters?" asked Roxas, surprised at how Axel would leave the following here, calling it a 'pain'.*

*"That would be violating orders," said Axel, teasingly.*

*"I get it. First of all, let's go back to the city," said Roxas, laughing.*

*The two of them returned to the city together.*



*They defeated Heartless inside the city. Collecting hearts in itself wasn't a very difficult thing.*

*"Will we RTC soon?"*

*"Yeah."*

*Just as he was about to head for the place where the dark corridor was opened, Axel held him back. Ahead of the two stood men and women who seemed to be residents of this world.*

*A woman with long, beautiful black hair, wearing gorgeous clothes that looked like something that would belong to royalty was clasping her hands worriedly to her chest, and looking at a man.*

*"Are you okay, Al? Shouldn't you rest a little?"*

*"I'm fine. Even if we can't do much, we gotta try and rebuild the city while the sandstorm is settled," Aladdin—Al—replied, but the woman looked down, an even more worried look on her face.*

*"That's true, but... if you go on like this, you'll collapse."*

*"I said I'm fine, Jasmine. We don't know when the next storm will come. We have to rebuild the city before the next sand storm comes."*

*Restoration of the city has definitely come along since the last time I was here. Storms probably haven't come for a while, either, I guess.*

*"If only Genie was here, at a time like this..."*

*The woman—Jasmine—murmured, head still down.*

*"Even if Genie was here, we can't rely on magic. It's our city, and we have to restore it with our own strength."*

*"Yeah... you're right." Jasmine finally raised her head, and a small smile could be seen on her face.*

*"Well, I gotta run."*

*"Wait, I'll help too."*

*Aladdin and Jasmine walked in the direction of the shops.*

*"I wonder if that guy we saw before has any connection to those two."*

*"Hm... guess we'll find out someday," answered Axel, sounding harassed.*

*"Let's hurry up and RTC." He started walking. Roxas chased after him in a flurry.*

*On the clock tower, the two of them ate ice cream side by side.*

*"You've gotten more cheerful," said Axel, peering into Roxas' face.*

*Really? Maybe, thought Roxas. Something's changed about Axel, too, since Castle Oblivion.*

*I don't really know what's changed, so I can't really tell him properly.*

*"You, too. You're brighter, too, Axel."*

*"Really? If that's true... maybe it's his influence."*

*"Huh?"*

*"Nah, it'd be from laughing and eating ice cream like this, the two of us. Because of you," said Axel, smoothing it over.*

*Who does he mean by 'his', I wonder.*

*Oh yeah, Xion's still not here.*

*"So Xion's not coming today, I guess..." Roxas muttered.*

*I feel kind of uneasy because we haven't been able to meet. It's a tiny bit like the feeling I got when I was told that Axel might have been annihilated.*

*I don't like it when people go.*

*Axel ate his ice cream in silence.*

*He woke up to an average morning.*

*Xion wasn't in the lobby today, either.*

*"Hey, Roxas," called Axel, and Roxas turned.*

*"Axel... have you seen Xion?"*

*Axel looked around, scratching his head. "Hm? Xion? Haven't seen them, come to think of it."*

*"It's been over ten days now," muttered Roxas, looking down. He hadn't seen her since he'd woken up.*

*"Straight after Xion joined the Organisation, I left for Castle Oblivion, so I don't really know much," said Axel, crossing his arms.*

*Even though they promised to eat ice cream, the three of us...*

*"I'll ask Saix for you later. Xion's your friend, right?"*

*"Yeah... thanks, Axel." Roxas nodded, and Axel patted his shoulder encouragingly.*

*"So, go get your mission over and done with quick."*

*Watching Roxas walk away, Axel sat on the sofa beside him.*

*I haven't met with Xion since I RTC'd.*

*Before I went to Castle Oblivion, I'd only seen their figure in the lobby a few times. Haven't even spoke to them before.*

*In the first place, I'm not even really sure whether it's a girl or a boy, and I've never seen their face.*

*Roxas said that Xion's a friend.*

*When did he make friends with that always-hooded guy?*

*After checking that Roxas and all the other members of the Organisation that were in the lobby had disappeared into dark corridors, Axel stood and called out to Saix.*

*“What’s my mission for today?”*

*“Have you finished your report on the Hero?”*

*Axel shrugged at Saïx’s demanding tone. One necessary job was to submit reports on some investigation missions.*

*“Nah, not yet...”*

*“Why did you think you were made to go out with Roxas yesterday, straight after coming home?” Saïx asked, wearily, heaving a sigh.*

*“...So I could write a report comparing Roxas and the Hero, right?”*

*“Thanks to you, there aren’t many people around to work. Hurry and hand in your report, and then go on your mission,” ordered Saïx, eyes dropping to the information in his hand.*

*“Yessir... oh yeah, I wanted to ask about Xion...”*

*Saïx looked up. His expression was strangely tight. “You shouldn’t be in contact with Xion, though.”*

*“It looks like Roxas is worried about where Xion is, that’s all.”*

*Saïx blinked, as if thinking for a second, then he said, “Because they are making contact.”*

*Looks like Saïx has a lot of thoughts about Xion.*

*“So, where did Xion go?”*

*“Still on a mission to put down a large Heartless, and isn’t back,” said Saïx, disagreeably.*

*“You’re just going to leave it as is?”*

*Sometimes, for whatever reason, our missions get dragged out, and we can’t return to the castle for several days. But, it’s a whole ‘nother ball game when they just ‘aren’t back’. There’s the possibility that they have been annihilated.*

*“I’m not ‘leaving it as is’. I have sent dusks out to investigate, however, they haven’t found anything yet. That’s all,” said Saïx, staring at Axel.*

*Axel knew, from having known Saïx a long time, that when Saïx’s expression*

*was like this, he was thinking about something important. Axel waited for Saïx to finish thinking, and speak.*

*“...I see. So you’re going to make contact with that thing soon, are you?”*

*“What do you mean?”*

*I know this has something to do with the Hero and Roxas. But, Xion is connected to that too?*

*If so, then I’d understand why Roxas would let them in. But, I don’t remember Xion ever putting the hood down, or even speaking a single word. Perhaps they let their hood down while I was in Castle Oblivion?*

*“You, who has been in contact with both Roxas and the Hero, will find it fun to make contact with that thing.”*

*“You’re not answering me, though.”*

*“When you’ve made contact, you’ll understand. You absolutely must hand in the report today. Tomorrow, I’ll make you and Roxas search for Xion.”*

*When he says that, there’s nothing to do but give him the report.*

*It feels like he’s dangling bait in front of my eyes, but whatever.*

*“Yessir. I shall write the report,” Axel shrugged, and headed for his own room.*

*Not sleeping much in the end, Axel wrote the report, and, deciding time was probably up, he headed for the lobby.*

*To be honest, report writing is really hard. It's a huge pain in the ass to think about what to report, what not to report, which parts to lie about...*

*No one was in the lobby.*

*Axel sat down on a sofa, and gave a big yawn. Even Nobodies need sleep. Just like that, he folded his arms and closed his eyes.*

*I just want to take a tiny nap...*

*"This is not a place to sleep," came a sudden voice in the silence, and Axel's eyes snapped open in surprise.*

*"What... oh, you, Saïx."*

*"What do you mean, what." Saïx glared down at Axel, unpleasantly. "Have you handed in your report?"*

*"Of course I have," replied Axel, stretching.*

*"If so, then head off on your mission with Roxas, as planned."*

*"Yessir."*

*Saïx left Axel cracking his neck as he stretched, going to stand in his usual spot.*

*After a short while, Demyx and Luxord appeared in the lobby, with Roxas finally appearing after them.*

*Axel got up off the sofa, stretching for the millionth time, and called out to Roxas. "You're late, Roxas."*

*"Sorry... I didn't really sleep well," said Roxas, rubbing his eyes.*

*"I asked Saïx about Xion," said Axel, and Roxas looked up. "Looks like she went out on a mission, and still isn't back."*

*Roxas looked down, worriedly. "So... does that mean she failed her mission...?" Pushing Roxas' shoulder, Axel started walking towards Saïx.*

*"We'll find out when we're there."*

*"What are you talking about?" Roxas pressed, and Axel smiled.*

*"Today's mission is to go look for Xion, you and me."*

*"Really?!" Roxas stared happily at Axel.*

*"Why would I lie? We'll leave once you're ready."*

*"Let's hurry and go!" Roxas ran towards Saïx.*

*"Hey hey, you gotta get ready properly. We don't know what's out there."*

*"I'll be fine," said Roxas, and turned to speak to Saïx. "Where's our mission today?"*

*"Twilight Town. Hurry and go look for Xion."*

*"Got it." You could think of Roxas as a little bit forceful at times like this, for some reason. "Let's go, Axel."*

*"Yessir," Axel responded. Roxas looked at him, irritated, and then opened the darkness beside him. He stepped inside.*



*Twilight Town was wrapped in the same sunset.*

*"I wonder where Xion is..." Roxas looked about, worriedly.*

*The corridor had opened up above the stairs in the alleyway.*

*"Xion's mission should have been to put down a large Heartless. That means there's a high possibility that Xion is wherever that guy might be."*

*Roxas seemed to be thinking hard about Axel's guess. "Well, it's good it wasn't a different world. I know pretty much all the places here. Let's gather information in the town."*

*"If it was a large Heartless, then it would have to be a wide place, right? Aren't the wide places in order here?"*

*"That's right. The widest place from here is... the empty lot?"*

*"Yeah... let's go."*

*The two climbed down the stairs in front of them, into the vacant lot.*

*"There's no sign of a Heartless..." muttered Axel. Beyond him, beside the vacant lot benches, two of the town's children were talking about something. Of the usual three, it was only the hot-tempered boy and the girl.*

*"Olette, where's Pence?"*

*"He went to check up on something by himself again today. He went into the tunnels."*

*So, the girl must be called Olette. Pence is the boy who isn't here... probably that chubby kid.*

*The boy whose name was yet unknown tilted his head. "That reminds me. Lately, he's been acting funny, whispering about something..."*

*Axel and Roxas listened to the conversation between Olette and the boy without hiding their presence.*

*"You think this has something to do with Xion?"*

*"Hm... Maybe, maybe not."*

*“Oh yeah. Yesterday, when I went into the usual spot, he quickly hid something.”*

*The boy crossed his arms. “Huuuh... Pence is weird. What’s he up to?”*

*Even though those three are almost always together, it looks like they each have their own concerns, and even go around on their own sometimes.*

*They said something interesting, too.*

*“Where do you think the ‘usual spot’ is?” muttered Roxas.*

*Axel shrugged. “Guess we just have to look. Roxas, got any clues?”*

*“Well, our ‘usual spot’ would be on the clock tower, but...”*

*“That’s not what they mean, though,” Axel grinned.*

*I want to hurry up and find Xion, and eat sea salt ice cream at the usual spot.*

*“Those three must have a special place for just the three of them.”*

*“Was there place like that?” Axel thought hard.*

*I thought I knew everything about the inside of this town, but nothing comes to mind. “It’s a special place for just three people, so I think it’d be a place people don’t come, somewhere not that big.”*

*“Our special place is like that too, hey... well, first of all let’s walk and look for it.” Axel set off in the direction of the tram square.*

*“Like, inside the tunnels?”*

*“Was there actually a place like that in the tunnels?” Axel said, immediately denying Roxas’ guess.*

*We’ve run through every nook and cranny inside those tunnels on previous missions, and there wasn’t anywhere that looked like someone could hide in.*

*A certain place crossed his mind.*

*“...Under the tracks?”*

*“Where’s that...?”*

*It seemed as if Axel didn’t know of the place under the train tracks.*

*“See, there’s this place like a storeroom with a fence door on it, on the corner where we came out today.”*

*‘Under the tracks’ was a storeroom-like place beneath the rails on which the train ran.*

*That place went largely unnoticed, and being small, it looked perfect for three people to gather in.*

*“Oh yeah, now that you’ve mentioned it, there is that place. Will we go have a look?”*

*A dusty smell clung to the air in the place under the rails. Floating dust particles sparkled in the light shining through the cracks in the train tracks above their heads.*

*“So this is the usual spot, right...”*

*“If there’s nothing here, we should just go look somewhere else,” Roxas answered, walking around the room. There was a couch, and a dartboard. And, there was a definite sign of people. There were signs that people were always coming and going.*

*“Hup!” Axel threw a dart at the board.*

*“Search seriously, okay.”*

*“This much is okay, I reckon.” Axel threw one more dart, which stuck nicely in the dead centre.*

*Now that I think of it, when I looked at that dart board just now, not a single one was stuck in it. “Where were those darts in the first place?”*

*“Over in that drum.” Axel pointed at an oil drum in the corner by the entrance.*

*“Here’s... huh?”*

*“Hm?”*

*Roxas peered behind the drum. A scrap of paper had fallen down there. “There’s a scrap of paper...” He picked it up. What appeared to be a map of the town had been drawn on it.*

*“Looks like a map,” said Axel, peering into Roxas’ hand.*

*“There’s lots of other stuff written on it.”*

*“Strange stone steps... friends on the other side of the wall... an echoing cry in the tunnels... another self... wriggling baggage...?” Axel read out, baffled.*

*Roxas read out the last of them. “Lastly, a ghost train, and a haunted mansion... seven written in all.”*

*“What the hell is this?” Axel brought the map closer to his face.*

*"...This map was hidden by that guy... that Pence guy, wasn't it."*

*"So, you reckon Pence will know what this is if we pop the question to him, as they say?" Axel asked in response, shrugging.*

*"So, looking for Pence is next on the list, as they say?" Roxas shrugged too, theatrically.*

*"Don't copy Xigbar," Axel laughed.*

*"You were the one doing it just before, weren't you, Axel?" said Roxas, also laughing.*

*The two laughed for some time, then looked at each other.*

*"They said just before that Pence went into the tunnels, didn't they... let's go, Axel."*

*And so they left the space under the train tracks... the usual spot for those kids.*

*Pence was in a room deep in the tunnels.*

*"Hey, Pence," Axel said all of a sudden, startling Roxas a little.*

*Isn't it Organisation regulation that we mustn't make contact with humans?*

*Pence looked up at Axel, slightly uneasy. "...Who are you?"*

*"There's a little something I wanna ask."*

*"Huuuh? If I'd know, I guess it's okay."*

*Pence looks suspicious of us, but it seems like he'll give us an answer.*

*"We'd like you to tell us if anything's changed in this town. There are heaps of weird things here, right...? Like, the strange stone steps, for example..."*

*Roxas watched Axel and Pence's exchange. For him to think of a question like that, when he's only seen the map...*

*"It looks like you guys are investigating the wonders of this town, too."*

*"Uh... yeah, I guess." Axel nodded a little exaggeratedly.*

*"Hmmm... Really, I wasn't going to tell anyone until I'd investigated them all, but... okay, I'll teach you what I've learned about the wonders of this town," said Pence, lowering his voice a little, as if he were talking about something of grave importance. "I tried my best to investigate them, but the truth is, the wonders of this town are..."*

*Roxas held his breath.*

*"...mostly good rumours."*

*"Huh?" What are you thinking, Roxas was about to say, but he stopped himself, barely.*

*"The strange stone stairs that you brought up just before were also just a silly joke."*

*"So you're saying this town is incredibly peaceful." Axel sighed in defeat, probably thinking the same thing as Roxas.*

*"But, there was the very best wonder."*

*“Very best...?” Roxas repeated.*

*“Yeah. I’m talking about a tree in the forest on the outskirts of town. There is one tree in the whole forest... if that tree is shaken, it stirs violently...” regaled Pence, in an eerie tone, and Roxas and Axel exchanged a look.*

*“What do you reckon? I still haven’t investigated that place, though. There’s also a rumour that even though there shouldn’t be anyone there, there’s some kind of presence.” Pence’s expression suddenly snapped into a grin.*

*Roxas tilted his head. “I don’t really get it.”*

*“Yeah, that’s why it’s a wonder. Since I don’t know the cause, I think I’ll go and check it out properly later.”*

*“I see,” Axel nodded.*

*“Well, I’m going back to investigating the town. Don’t spread what I’ve told you around, okay?” said Pence, and he left the room.*

*“In the end, we didn’t find out a thing,” said Roxas, with a mingled sigh. We didn’t find out a single thing about Xion.*

*“Nah, that’s not true. He said there’s some presence in the forest outside of town, right? Maybe that was Xion’s target to put down.”*

*Axel’s right. Pence had already solved most of the mysteries. And the wonder that was still unclear... is the one with a high chance of being connected to Xion.*

*“Okay, let’s go have a look at that place.”*

*Roxas and Axel headed for the forest outside of town.*

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*It's no good.*

*I don't know what to do.*

*Xion sat in the forest on the outskirts of town, hugging her knees. It was chilly in the forest, the air damp.*

*No matter how many times I wish, the Keyblade won't come to me.*

*I can't use the Keyblade. I can get on to some degree with magic, but I can't report back if I defeat huge Heartless and a heart doesn't come out. I'll expose to Saïx that I can't use the Keyblade.*

*And... maybe I'll be annihilated.*

*What will I do? What should I...*

*At that moment, Xion heard a familiar voice, and she looked up.*

*"Around here?"*

*It was Roxas' voice.*

*It's not strange for Roxas to be in Twilight Town.*

*Next to him is... a redheaded member of the Organisation. It must be Axel, Roxas' friend.*

*The two of them were looking up into the trees.*

*Hidden in those trees was a huge Heartless—Vanish Lizard.*

*Shaped like a chameleon, it was a Heartless that could become invisible in a transparent state and hide itself.*

*Xion has fought it just once with magic, and then fled.*

*The trees shook.*

*"Heheh... looks like we hit a winner."*

*A large presence slipped out of the forest, running towards the haunted mansion.*

*"Let's go Roxas, no losing time now."*



*"I know that!"*

*Roxas and Axel sprinted after it.*

*Xion took a determined breath, stood up, and followed after the two.*

*In front of the haunted mansion, the whole of the huge Heartless—the Vanish Lizard—was obvious.*

*Roxas readied his Keyblade. “So this is Xion’s target?”*

*“Probably. I guess it vanished and hid in the forest,” said Axel, also gripping a chakram in each hand.*

*“And Xion is?”*

*“Well, seeing what it can do, I’d say she’s probably still looking for it.”*

*Axel wrapped himself in flames.*

*“What’ll we do?”*

*“Do I even have to say!” He shot fire at the Vanish Lizard.*

*“Got it!”*

*Roxas ran at the Vanish Lizard too, Keyblade in hand, and both of their attacks exploded at about the same time.*

*Just then.*

*A shadow rushed into the area—someone wearing the black coat of the Organisation.*

*“Xion!” Roxas yelled.*

*That’s Xion... I guess? Axel couldn’t tell whether that person, hood still up, was Xion or not.*

*But, it seemed to him that Roxas could tell it was Xion, even with the hood up.*

*“Roxas!” Preoccupied with them she was left open for a moment, and the Vanish Lizard sent her flying with its tail.*

*At that time, Axel heard Xion’s voice for the first time. It was the voice of a little girl.*

*“Xion!” Roxas went to run to Xion, but Axel grabbed him by the shoulder.*

*“Roxas—defeating that thing comes first for now!”*

*"...Yeah." No sooner than he'd answered, Roxas turned back, and brought his Keyblade down on the Vanish Lizard.*

*I thought the same thing when we went on a mission together the day before yesterday or whenever it was, but Roxas has gotten strong.*

*It's different from normal growth... I wanna suspect something else, something more has happened. Maybe it's got something to do with Sora.*

*Axel went to give Roxas cover, throwing a chakram at the Vanish Lizard.*

*"Let's go!" Roxas leapt, and the blow that connected wounded the Vanish Lizard mortally.*

*Its body disappeared wrapped in light, and just the heart floated up.*

*Not even indulging in the significance of defeating a huge Heartless, Roxas ran to Xion, and helped her stand.*

*"Xion, are you okay?"*

*"...Roxas..."*

*Her hood still up, Axel couldn't tell what her expression was at all.*

*"Are you injured?"*

*"Thank you... I'm okay... but..." The voice coming from under the hood was small and thin.*

*First of all, it'd be better to move somewhere else.*

*"We'll get into the details later. First of all, let's move. You guys go ahead to the clock tower," said Axel and he started walking.*

*Axel bought three ice creams from the usual shop, and walked slowly towards the clock tower.*

*I wanted a bit of time to think. Time to think about these things I can't understand.*

*Why would Roxas get so worried over Xion...?*

*I can't think anyone could trust someone who hides their face, their expression unknowable.*

*It's funny to speak of trust and reliance between Nobodies, members of the Organisation, in the first place, but even so, I'm not satisfied with that.*

*We promised to eat ice cream together, the three of us.*

*How did Xion get Roxas' trust so far as to make that promise?*

*I'd have a rough time trying to explain how I got his trust, but I was his very first mentor, and I was the one who made contact with Roxas, and I meant to look after him in my own way.*

*But Xion is different.*

*What on earth happened while I was at Castle Oblivion... Axel thought, as he climbed the stairs up the clock tower.*

*"Well, I can think all I want, but it can't be helped," he muttered quietly, and walked up to where Roxas and Xion sat side by side. "Were you waiting?" Axel called. He walked behind them, and sat on the very end, giving Roxas and Xion and ice cream each.*

*"Here ya go."*

*"Thank you..."*

*That was the first conversation Axel and Xion had ever had. Her face was, as always, hidden deep in her hood and shrouded in darkness, so that he could not*

*see her expression.*

*Roxas started gnawing on his ice cream right away, but Xion just sat there, holding it.*

*"Your ice cream'll melt," Roxas told her.*

*"...Yeah," Xion nodded, but she still didn't move.*

*"What's up? Hurry up and eat it."*

*At least, I can tell from her voice that she's female. But, I don't know a single thing other than that.*

*And, I don't really like hanging out with girls. Press the wrong button, and women fly into a bad mood.*

*Roxas looked into Xion's face. "Did something happen?"*

*It's like he can see her expression, but he shouldn't be able to.*

*Xion stayed silent.*

*With no other choice, Axel opened his mouth. "If you've got troubles, you tell them to your friends... right? Roxas."*

*Roxas nodded, and said, "We're... friends, right?"*

*"At those words, Xion finally spoke. "I can't... use the Keyblade anymore."*

*Keyblade? What does she mean? Does that mean Xion can wield the Keyblade too? I hadn't heard that. If Xion is a Keyblade Wielder, I can sort of accept that as the reason why Roxas would let her in.*

*"If I can't use the Keyblade, I can't complete missions." Even under the hood, they could see that her shoulders were trembling.*

*"What on earth happened?" asked Roxas.*

*Xion shook her head. "I don't know... But, if I don't destroy Heartless with the Keyblade, even if I free the heart from it, it will only go and turn into a Heartless again. All I can do is make them stop existing for a while." They could hear a slight shake in her voice, too. "I have to collect hearts. And so, if I can't use the Keyblade... I... am useless." Xion hung her head. Her melting ice cream dampened her hand.*

*"Can't something be done, Axel?" Roxas begged, but Axel shrugged.*

*"Something...? There's nothing we can do. Without a Keyblade, she can't collect hearts." I didn't even know until just now that she ever was a Keyblade Wielder.*

*"Like this... I... will get turned into a dusk..."*

*I'm no good at listening to a girl who sounds like she's about to cry.*

*"We'll never let that happen." Roxas' tone was just a little strong.*

*The words 'if you're going to say something like that, then do something yourself,' got as far as Axel's throat, but he swallowed them.*

*Roxas is the only one who can wield the Keyblade. It's not like she could take his.*

*"So we can't let that... wait." Axel glanced at Roxas.*

*"Did you think of a way?" Roxas asked, happily. Beside him, Xion stayed silent, face hidden in her hood.*

*"Roxas, you should just do your best."*

*"Huh?" Xion said, just as Roxas asked "...What do you mean?"*

*This is the first time I've felt Xion look at me, thought Axel. "Until you can use the Keyblade again, Xion, you two should make sure to always stick together. That way, no one will figure out that you can't use your Keyblade."*

*"I see...!" Roxas smiled.*

*"But, you'd have to try twice as hard from now on, Roxas."*

*"I'll do my best," said Roxas giving a strong nod.*

*But, Xion looked worried. "...Is that okay?"*

*"Of course it's okay!"*

*"But..." Xion cast her eyes down again. The ice cream in her hand was mostly melted.*

*"When you're in trouble, you can count on your friends, right, Roxas?" Axel said, and Roxas smiled, looking at Xion.*

*“Friends... Axel... are you my friend, too?” Xion asked, in a feeble voice, and Axel unconsciously turned his gaze away, to look at the sunset. He was at a loss as to what he should tell her.*

*I don’t know why. But, maybe the reason is, Xion is Roxas’ friend now. I can’t see Xion’s face... but, it makes me think that there’s something special about Xion. I didn’t get that impression at all when I first saw her.*

*“If you’re a friend of Roxas’... you’re a friend of mine,” Axel answered, looking back over at Xion.*

*What?*

*For a second, his breath was knocked out of him.*

*The raven-haired girl, hood off, was looking right at Axel.*

*When did she take it off? While I was watching the sunset just now? And that face... looks just like Naminé.*

*What does this mean? Whose Nobody is Xion?*

*“Thank you... Roxas, Axel.”*

*“It’s fine, so hurry up and eat your ice cream,” Axel replied, covering that he was shaken, and Xion finally began to eat her melting ice cream.*

*The setting sun shone on the three of them.*

*The next day... was the 75<sup>th</sup> day since Roxas joined the Organisation.*

*"Morning, Roxas," Xion called, as he entered the lobby.*

*Her voice is cheery.*

*Axel was also there, in a corner of the lobby.*

*"Morning," greeted Roxas, a smile surfacing on his face.*

*"Thank you, you know."*

*"Yeah."*

*Both of them looked at Saïx.*

*If they couldn't get his permission to go on missions together, they wouldn't even get to start.*

*But... we discussed that, too, yesterday with Axel.*

*Axel, standing in the corner with an innocent face, winked at him.*

*"Let's go," said Roxas, and Xion nodded, and the two of them walked over to Saïx together.*

*"Saïx."*

*"Huh, Roxas." Saïx ran his eyes over the information in his hand. "Today, your mission is..."*

*"Before that, I have a request. Could you please let me and Xion go on missions together?"*

*Saïx raised his brows.*

*"I think it's... no good..." said Xion, in a small voice.*

*"I wonder what would make you think that at a time like this, when we already don't have enough hands..."*

*Axel cut off Saïx's scolding. "It's okay, isn't it? Working together, these two newbies could finally work at least as much as one person, right?"*

*Saïx turned to Axel with a sour look on his face.*



*“If we can go together, I think we’d even be able to handle harder missions,” Roxas added, immediately.*

*Saïx shook his head slightly.*

*So it’s no good after all. Roxas looked at the floor. But, the answer was unexpected.*

*“...I see. Okay.”*

*Roxas and Xion suppressed their joy, and nodded.*

*After watching Roxas and Xion leave, Saïx turned to Axel, standing behind him.*

*“What did you intend to do.”*

*“What did I intend to do? Offer some friendly help?” Axel replied, and grinned at Saïx.*

*“Whatever... maybe it will be convenient after all.” Saïx forced his mouth to relax.*

*“...What do you mean?”*

*“Now that you’ve made contact with Xion, what are your impressions?”*

*Returning my question with a question. Saïx never answers me at times like this. “I don’t have any impressions or... it’s nothing... it’s just how it looks, right?” Even if I ask about Xion now, I don’t imagine Saïx would answer.*

*“Heh heh... that’s right, it’s just how it looks, isn’t it,” Saïx laughed. “You have to hurry up and head off on your mission, too. You’re investigating a new world.”*

*“Roger that,” Axel answered, opening a dark corridor straight away, and stepping inside.*

*The dark corridor isn’t pure darkness; it’s dimly lit.*

*Axel stopped walking.*

*Just how it looks...*

*I’m pretty sure Saïx shouldn’t have met Naminé before, but he probably knows what she looks like from data. That would mean that whatever Xion is, it’s just how she looks.*

*Those two look awfully similar.*

*Xion is a Nobody with a relation to Naminé. Actually, if I were to take a guess based on how she looks, she’s probably a Nobody born at the same time as Naminé. The special Nobodies known as Xion and Naminé must have been born in some kind of shape from a Princess –Kairi—who had no darkness in her heart.*

*That's just how it looks... the answer is that the two who look similar are connected.*

*The same bond between Sora and Kairi has probably become the bond between Roxas and Xion. That's why Roxas was drawn to Xion like that, not even knowing what she looked like.*

*And, maybe there's something 'convenient' about Roxas and Xion working together.*

*Axel started walking again.*

*Even so... I wonder why I care about those two like this.*

*Is that the power of the Keyblade Hero?*

*The mission with Xion was to investigate the cave in Agrabah.*

*There was an accident that involved barely escaping a cave-in, but they finished the investigation by and by.*

*"We managed to... escape, didn't we," said Xion, heaving a deep sigh of relief.*

*"Yeah, key word is 'managed', though."*

*After a brief moment, Xion pointed over Roxas' shoulder. "R-Roxas... behind you!"*

*"Huh?" Roxas spun around, and there was... not a human.*

*That thing, swaying around, was...*

*"...A carpet?" said Roxas, suspiciously. The carpet rubbed against him, enticingly.*

*"W-what is this?!"*

*"Roxas, are you okay?" Xion touched the carpet, uneasily. But, the carpet didn't seem to hate it in particular.*

*"Ah, ahh... it doesn't look like... an enemy..."*

*"It seems to like you, Roxas..."*

*Roxas tilted his head. "Why me?"*

*"I dunno."*

*"Uwah?!"*

*This time, an exceptionally large, blue, bearded man was floating in the air next to Roxas, arms folded. He didn't seem to have any legs, somehow. He's not human, is he?*

*"W-who are you?!" Xion shrieked. Then, fluttering right and left, the mysterious person brought his face up to Xion.*

*"Who?! Did you just ask who I am?!"*

*"Ye... yeah."*

*That large mouth opened, still in a grin. "Okay! Then let me introduce myself. I, who wants to hide something, was once the genie of the lamp, Genie! And this here is my companion, the magic carpet! Pleased to meet you!" Genie took Roxas' right hand and shook it, then whizzed around.*

*"P-pleased to meet you...." I don't really know what to do, faced with a greeting like that.*

*"Wait, wait, wait! You have to have more energy! You can't get happy with a gloomy face like that on, right?" Genie insisted, pushing his face in as close to Roxas' as possible.*

*"Y-yeah..." Roxas stepped back, escaping him.*

*"So, who are you?"*

*"Uh... um..." I can't reveal what I really am.*

*While he was lost thinking for an answer, Genie began to yabber as he pleased. "I was just about to go see how the city's doing, when Carpet here said 'there's an acquaintance here', and flew off."*

*"Acquaintance? Me, and... this Carpet?"*

*"Yeah! So, I came to see, wondering who it was... and here I find you guys, who I've never met!" Genie waved his hand around, and tilted his head. "You wrong, Carpet?"*

*Carpet shook the upper half of its body... rather, the upper half in denial of Genie's words.*

*"...You said you came to see how the city is doing... are you talking about the city in the middle of the desert?" Roxas asked, and Genie nodded wildly, spinning and treading on steps in the air.*

*"Yeah, that's Agrabah, where my number one best friend Al is."*

*"Best friend...?" That's the first time I've heard those words.*

*"The truth is, right now, Genie and Carpet are right in the middle of our much-desired world trip." Genie, who was speaking so happily, became a little lonely-looking.*

*“But... I got a bit worried about my biggest and bestest friend Al... so I popped back to see how things are.”*

*“Worry? So, you worry about best friends?” Roxas asked, and Genie dabbed at his eyes with a white hanky he’d pulled out of somewhere.*

*“You worry and worry! Are things going well with Jasmine... has the city changed at all... so many things I’m interested in, I can’t contain myself...”*

*“I don’t know anything about this Al person... but it looked like the city was in the middle of being repaired.”*

*“Yeah, a sandstorm came. They say it was terrible.”*

*“What?!” Genie flew high in the air. “For such a terrible thing to happen while I was away! Okay, wait! I’ll fix the town right back the way it was with my magic...” Genie raised both hands high.*

*“But, the guy called Al said that they wanted to rebuild the city with their own strength, without relying on magic,” said Roxas, repeating the conversation he’d overheard when he’d come to this world recently with Axel.*

*Genie hung his head, sadly. “Oh... If Al said that, then I don’t have a role...”*

*“You won’t fix the city?” Roxas asked, tentatively.*

*“Al said he wouldn’t rely on magic, right? I want to fix it for him, but you gotta respect your friend’s wishes.”*

*“Your friend’s... wishes...” So, even if you mean for something to be for your friend’s sake, their wishes are still more important?*

*Roxas looked at Genie, thinking. Just then, something poked him in the back. Xion whispered in his ear, from behind. “Roxas, we have to get back.”*

*“Ah... yeah,” Roxas nodded, and right before his eyes, Genie and Carpet soared into the sky.*

*“But, I could still help a little!” Light shot from his fingers, and the sandstorm at the edge of the desert disappeared. “Now the city is safe! Come to think of it... who are you guys?”*

*But—when Genie turned around, no one was there.*

*"So, the mission went without a hitch?"*

*Xion and Roxas turned back at the same time. They each had an ice cream in their hand.*

*Twilight Town—on top of the clock tower.*

*"Yeah, looks like we did okay, somehow... thanks to you, Roxas and Axel."*

*"That's good," answered Axel, sitting in his usual place, and starting to eat his own ice cream. "Hey, where did you guys go on your mission, anyway?" he asked, after a moment of eating in silence.*

*Roxas looked puzzled. "You and me went there before, Axel... um..."*

*"Agrabah, wasn't it?" Xion answered, from beside him.*

*"That city in the desert, I see," Axel added.*

*The conversation trailed off there.*

*The three of them ate their ice cream.*

*By and by, the sound of the distant train reached them, and finally, Xion opened her mouth. "That Genie person seemed very worried about that Al person. And then he said that you have to respect your friend's wishes." Xion bit her ice cream, swinging her feet.*

*Axel leaned his head to one side. "Your friend's wishes, huh..." It feels like I have heard that before, a long time ago, when I was human.*

*"Cause Genie said he's a guy called Al's number one best friend," said Roxas, looking at Axel.*

*"Best friend... that's different to a friend, isn't it?" Xion added, also looking at Axel.*

*"It's the same kind of thing," Axel replied, and Roxas and Xion looked at each other.*

*"...Best friends..." Roxas murmured, and the conversation trailed off again. This time it was Axel, finishing his ice cream, who broke the silence.*

*"...If I had to, I'd say that it's like one rank above 'friend'."*

*"Then how is it different to a friend?"*

*Axel gazed at the sunset, not answering Roxas' question.*

*Nobodies can play at being friends, but I don't think it's possible to play at being best friends. I don't know how to answer.*

*Axel narrowed his eyes against the setting sun, and said, "Well... I don't have a best friend, so I don't know."*

*"Oh..." Roxas said. Xion didn't say anything.*

*The setting sun shone on the three of them.*



*The time is ripe...*

*A great heart has at last appeared before us.*

*Rage... hatred... sadness, and happiness.*

*All gathered together are the fruits of the heart... that is Kingdom Hearts.*

*The world will begin to reform from now.*

*Gentlemen!*

*In order to gain more power, and, in order to have hearts of our own...*

*All gathered together, we Nobodies must not forget our goal.*

*To gather hearts, to have hearts of our own, to not let the heart mislead us.*

XXX

***Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days: Vol 1. The 14th Complete! The series is continued in Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days: Vol 2. Go to the Sea***